

#7

ryo shirakome
takahashi

ARIFURETA:

ARIFURETA SHOKUGYOU DE SEKAISAIKYOU

FROM COMMONPLACE
TO WORLD'S STRONGEST





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katayaki

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tatsuyuki

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**SHIRASAKI
KAORI**

"WHH,
DON'T WE
STAND
OUT A
LITTLE
TOO
MUCH?"

**SHIZUKU
YAEGASHI**

"IS IT REALLY
ALRIGHT TO
BE HERE..."

-IMPERIAL CASTLE: BALLROOM-

TIO

"BOTH
THE FOOD
AND THE
LIQUOR
HERE ARE
EXQUI-
SITE."

SHEA

"I NEVER
KNEW
THERE
WERE
PLACES
LIKE THIS
IN THE
WORLD."



YUE

"MMM...
GLADLY!"

**HAJIME
NAGUMO**

"YUE,
WANNA
DANCE?"

PROLOGUE

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Prologue

“Commander. Is what the messenger said... really true?” A pair of men walked through the dense white mist. The younger of the two was dark-skinned, and his ears tapered to a point. He was a demon.

The older man turned to his companion and considered the question. He had a stern expression, which was only befitting of his age, and wrinkles deeper than the Reisen Gorge.

“Vice-Captain Celeka. Do you mean to imply that our messengers are lying to us?” the man intoned gravely.

“N-No, of course not. I would never even think of... My apologies, Commander Davros.” The young man named Celeka shook his head hurriedly.

Davros glared at Celeka, the rebuke in his gaze clear. Celeka was a high-ranking member of the army. Someone of his station shouldn’t have been making careless remarks like that. Especially not in earshot of the army marching behind them.

“Our messengers were willing to sacrifice the monsters they’d been given to deliver us that report. There’s no doubt it’s all true.”

“But... I can’t believe Freid-sama really was injured that badly... and to think—” *To think that the enemy survived Freid trapping them in the Grand Gruen Volcano while it was erupting.* Celeka didn’t finish the rest of his sentence.

However, Davros understood exactly what he was trying to say.

“All that means is that the humans have someone that powerful on their side.”

“I can’t believe it. This is Freid-sama we’re talking about here! He had Uranos with him, along with a personal army of monsters... Could he really have lost?”

Though he kept his voice low, Celeka couldn’t hide his distress.

Davros once again glared reproachfully at his vice-captain. Celeka gulped and clamped his mouth shut. Though if he was being honest, Davros didn’t blame the boy for being so worried.

It had been two months since Davros had taken his elite squad out of Garland, the demon kingdom, and headed to scout the Haltina Woods. They were searching for the true entrance to the labyrinth that was hidden within.

The entire forest was an unmapped region inhabited by beastmen and monsters. Dense fog blanketed the trees year-round, confusing the

senses and making navigation impossible. Only the beastmen and the monsters native to the forest were immune to the fog's effects.

Freid Bagwa, supreme commander of Garland's forces, had ordered elite squads to seek out the other labyrinths and conquer them. The source of his own strength had come from conquering one of the labyrinths and obtaining the secrets of one of the ancient magics held in its depths.

Freid wanted as many of his brethren as possible capable of using ancient magic, so he'd sent the best of his men out to find the others and absorb their strength.

Davros was one of Garland's oldest commanders, and both Freid and the demon lord trusted him implicitly. They had selected him for this mission because they believed he was capable enough to handle the sea of trees and the true labyrinth that was in its depths.

Davros placed great faith in the opinions of Freid and his king, and he believed in his own strength. Though he knew the labyrinths' trials were dangerous, he believed he could take on whatever was in store.

Especially because he had an unbeatable trump card.

"Grrr."

"Screeech."

The monster mounts that Davros and his unit were riding growled, their hackles raised. Their cries sounded like metal screeching on metal.

They were powerful creatures, granted to Davros by Freid. Not only were they immune to the befuddling effects of the fog, they were far stronger than most monsters. And they were the demons' trump card.

All of the other units Freid had sent out to conquer key cities and discover the locations of the remaining labyrinths had also possessed monsters he'd created himself.

So long as they had Freid's monsters, they would be unbeatable. Every demon Freid had sent out had been confident of that fact.

Davros' faith in his god and the supremacy of his race had been absolute, and he had been certain they would be able to prove the superiority of the demons' ideals through their inevitable victory.

But now, Davros wasn't so sure. Not after all the reports he'd heard.

In order to find their way through the forest, Davros had needed to rely on Freid's monsters. On top of that, he'd needed to bring a sizable force with him. There was no telling how many beastmen and monsters he'd have to face along the way, and facing all of that alone would have been difficult. That had meant they couldn't rely on airborne monsters to transport them.

After all, no matter how strong Davros was, and no matter how powerful Freid's monsters could be, he didn't want to alert Verbergen of their presence. A large flock of airborne monsters passing over the forest would have done just that. Fighting Verbergen head-on with his numbers would have been unwise, so he'd stuck to stealth.

He'd started by following the south edge of the Reisen Gorge east, and entered the forest from the southern side. The Haltina Woods stretched a few hundred kilometers into the southern continent, so getting in had been a simple task

After that they had traveled north, sticking to places where the trees were less dense.

Maintaining contact with Garland had been easy, as the demons controlled the southern fringes of the forest.

Davros had been expecting to hear triumphant reports of how each demon had flawlessly carried out their respective mission. Instead, this was what he'd received:

—Mission to cripple the humans' agricultural capacity and assassinate the Fertility Goddess. Failed. Lace, the demon in charge of the mission, has been gravely injured. He will not be returning to active duty. All monsters under his command were annihilated.

—Mission to conquer the true Great Orcus Labyrinth and solicit the human heroes onto our side. Failed. Cattleya, the demon in charge of the mission, was killed in action. All monsters under her command were annihilated.

—Mission to conquer Ankaji. Failed. Logan, the demon in charge of the mission, returned safely. Most monsters under his command were annihilated.

One after another, Davros heard reports of his comrades being defeated. Whenever someone from the messenger squad came to report, it was with a grim expression on their face.

However, the most unbelievable report had come in just as Davros' squad was closing in on Verbergen.

—General Freid crossed forces with an unknown enemy at the Grand Gruen Volcano. He suffered grievous injuries and was forced to abandon the volcano. He is currently recuperating.

Freid, the invincible demon hero, had suffered his first defeat. Davros had been utterly shocked when he'd heard. He was glad now that he'd instructed the messenger to only inform his lieutenants of this report.

His men's morale would have been in tatters otherwise. The fact that his vice-captain had come to him about it right after they'd met up proved that keeping quiet about it had been the right decision.

Naturally, Davros himself was greatly disturbed by the news too. Still, more than that, he was furious. Furious at this upstart human

who dared oppose the chosen race and spit on what should have been their glorious conquest.

“Commander, there appears to be a settlement in front of us. We’ve entered beastmen territory.” Davros nodded at Celeka’s report. He was determined to send the first positive report back to the capital, to make up for his comrades’ losses.

“Listen up, men. Right now, General Freid will have begun the invasion of Heiligh’s capital, while Divoff’s squad should be in place to assassinate the emperor. They will surely succeed and bring glory to our great nation. There would be no greater shame than to return home empty-handed while our peers succeed!” Celeka and the others began burning with an unquenchable thirst for blood. Their monsters roared their approval with their strange, metallic screeching. These were a new species Freid had only recently created.

Unfortunately for Davros, his conviction came from ignorance. He wasn’t aware that the same enemy who had defeated Freid would once again appear at the capital and thwart their ambitions. Or that an army of extremely powerful and bloodthirsty soldiers, trained by that very same man, called this place their home.

Little did he know that this invasion he believed to be simple would turn into the worst nightmare of his life.

Chapter I: Haulias Assemble!

Shizuku Yaegashi watched the thick clouds roll by below her. She occasionally caught glimpses of plains, forest, and villages through gaps in the clouds, but they flashed past too quickly to make out details.

Despite the speed they were going at, the breeze was quite mild. Her ponytail fluttered in the pleasantly cool air as she took in the scenery. After a while, she looked up and saw the sun dazzling brilliantly above her.

It looked close enough that she felt she'd be able to reach it just by stretching her hand out.

She brought a hand up to shield her eyes and leaned back against the guardrail. Expression pensive, she muttered something in a tired voice.

"I can't believe he built an entire airship too. When it comes to him, I don't think anything could surprise me anymore." Indeed, Shizuku was currently standing on the aft deck of Hajime's personal airship, Fernir. He had crafted it primarily out of gravityrock and spirit stone, and it served as his newest mode of transportation. It possessed a multitude of features, and was about 120 meters in length. From above, it vaguely resembled a manta ray. The ship's bridge sat near the front of the craft, while the center served as a massive living room of sorts. There was also a residential quarter, and each of the rooms came furnished with its own kitchen and bathroom.

It was easily the largest and fastest vehicle in existence, at least as far as Tortus was concerned.

"It's like I'm dreaming..." She was soaring above the clouds. The world's greatest view was all around her.

She breathed another long sigh. Despite the magnificence around her, Shizuku didn't seem too impressed.

Hajime had declared that he wouldn't lift a finger for the people of this world, so Kouki had begged him to help them conquer a labyrinth so he could gain the strength to do it in Hajime's stead. As a result, he and Shizuku had decided to join Hajime on his quest, though each for different reasons.

All that aside, the airship was just too amazing. There was so much to take in that Shizuku had gone from wonder to a strange sort of resigned acceptance. Normally, the trek to Haltina would take a

party three months on foot. Hajime's airship could get them there in two and a half days.

The Hoelscher Empire, which sat between Haltina and Heiligh, was a little over a day's travel.

Liliana, Heiligh's princess, had almost fainted in shock when she'd seen the airship and heard how fast it could travel. It had been quite unbecoming of someone of her stature. She was heading to Hoelscher to discuss what countermeasures the humans should take against the demons.

On an unrelated note, Hajime had actually wanted to make an airship ever since he'd cleared Miledi's labyrinth. However, he hadn't been skilled enough to do so until just recently.

Enchanting ore with gravity magic was a difficult process, and the larger the object you wanted to enchant the more skill it required. At first, the biggest things Hajime had been able to enchant with gravity magic were his Cross Bits.

Not only did enchanting larger objects require more skill, it also made remotely controlling that object with spirit stone more difficult.

The larger the object made of gravityrock was, the more it took out of you to operate.

An otaku like Hajime had dreamed of making an airship ever since he'd discovered it was possible, he just hadn't possessed enough skill to do so.

But of course, he was a Synergist at heart. He refused to compromise by making his craft any smaller or less complex. Instead, he'd continued training at every opportunity, until finally his transmuting skill had reached the point where he was able to craft it to perfection.

Once it was complete, he'd unveiled his creation to the others the day they'd left the capital.

"You always get air travel in the final act of an RPG, right?" He'd tried to sound as nonchalant as possible, but he hadn't been able to hide the grin on his face.

Yue and the others had taken it in stride as they were used to Hajime's antics by now, but the other students were surprised to see such a childish side of Hajime.

Their surprise grew when they discovered how much mana it took just to make the ship float. Making it go at the speeds Hajime did took so much that the students couldn't even wrap their head around the idea. Operating it for any length of time would require an unbelievably large mana pool and a ridiculous rate of mana regeneration. Only a scant few people could even make it move.

"I never knew the sky was so blue..." Shizuku muttered absentmindedly, trying not to think of the logistics that were making

this flight possible. Her thoughts were interrupted by a familiar voice.

“So this is where you were, Shizuku.”

“Kouki...” Shizuku looked back down at the deck. Kouki was in the process of clambering out of the top hatch.

Once he was out, he walked over to Shizuku and placed both hands on the guardrail.

For a few moments, he just silently watched the clouds fly by.

“This is... amazing.”

“Yeah. I’m actually getting tired of getting shocked every time.”

Kouki was of course referring to Fernir. Though he was praising the airship, he seemed more terrified and frustrated than impressed.

Shizuku could guess the source of his dissatisfaction, but she didn’t want to talk about it, so she changed the topic.

“Did you come up here alone? What’s everyone else doing?”

Kouki, Shizuku, and Liliana weren’t the only ones who’d joined Hajime on the ship. Liliana had brought her personal maid and ten royal guards with her, while the rest of Kouki’s party had followed him on.

Aiko had stayed behind, as she hadn’t wanted to leave the other students unsupervised. The members of Nagayama’s and Yuka’s parties had remained behind to protect the rest of the class and the capital. They hadn’t wanted to leave the people there completely defenseless.

Still, there was a possibility Freid might return with another army, so Kouki had convinced Hajime to leave behind a long-range teleportation artifact in the capital so that they could return at a moment’s notice if necessary.

“Ryutarou and the royal guards are eating the dinner Shea-san made for them. Suzu and Lily are talking in their room. Nagumo’s... flirting with everyone. He’s just lazing about on the bridge...”

Shizuku examined her friend’s face. Kouki’s lips were twisted in a strange grimace, a plethora of emotions showing on his face.

Shizuku smiled playfully at him.

“What, mad that Nagumo-kun’s more popular than you now?”

“As if...” Kouki frowned at Shizuku’s ribbing and replied in a curt tone. Finally, he spat out what was really eating at him.

“He can make all these amazing things... and he’s so strong... yet he acts like it’s all nothing to him. And how can he just abandon the people of this world like that?”

“.....” Kouki still wasn’t able to come to terms with Hajime’s decision to ignore the gods and go back home.

He’s got all this power, so why doesn’t he use it to help these people and kill the gods? Shizuku could read his thoughts like an open book.

“I think... that’s because he’s made his choice.”

“What choice?” Kouki looked Shizuku in the eyes. She kept her expression neutral and picked her words carefully.

“I don’t think... he has it as easy as he makes it look. I’m sure he’s just trying to make it seem like nothing’s bothering him, while in reality he’s quite desperate. Desperate to protect the ones he loves, and make it out of this ordeal alive.”

“.....”

“Remember what he said? You don’t do something because you’re strong enough to do it, you get stronger to accomplish what you want to do... Well, something like that, anyway.”

Deep furrows formed in Kouki’s brow as he frowned. He averted his gaze, unable to meet Shizuku’s yes.

After all, he’d been thinking differently. *If I was that strong, I would definitely save the world.* It seemed similar to Hajime’s way of thinking at first glance, but was fundamentally different.

“Kouki, I know you’re feeling frustrated at the gap in your strength and his. But remember, he didn’t start out that strong. He earned that strength by crawling out of hell despite being the weakest one of us. Everything he has now is a result of his unbreakable determination. And what he’s determined to do isn’t kill the gods or save the world. It’s something a lot simpler. He’s fighting for the sake of those close to him.” Shizuku observed Kouki’s profile, gauging his reaction. Normally he’d meet her gaze, but he didn’t now. He continued looking anywhere but at her.

However, Shizuku continued talking, hoping that her words might lead her friend to make better choices.

“He’s different from us, who decided to help because we could. So you can’t expect him to agree to save the world just because it’s something he *can* do. That’s not what he worked so hard for, and he knows that if he uses his power for something he doesn’t care about, he might lose the things he does.”

“I don’t get it...” Kouki’s expression grew more complicated. This was the first time he’d had to deal with a set of values so completely different from his own, and it was confusing him.

However, he didn’t ignore Shizuku’s words, and did his best to make sense of them.

Shizuku could tell how hard he was trying, and her expression softened a little.

“Hmm... It’s not exactly the same, but think of it this way. You spent your whole life training to be the world’s best boxer, but then someone comes along and says ‘If you’re that strong, how come you’re not patrolling the streets beating up thugs and gangsters!’ You probably wouldn’t like that, right?”

“Now that you mention it... I guess you’re right... B-But lives are

at stake here!” Kouki was arguing more out of stubbornness than anything at this point. And so, Shizuku narrowed her eyebrows and responded.

“I mean it’s a good thing that you can’t ignore anyone in need, but... that’s how you think Kouki, not how Nagumo-kun does. You can’t force your values onto him.”

“So you’re taking his side now?”

Shizuku sighed at Kouki’s pouting.

“You sound like a five-year-old. I’m just trying to explain how everyone’s different. And in case you’ve forgotten, Nagumo-kun’s saved plenty of people already. Not just us, either. He saved the town of Ur, and according to Kaori he saved everyone in Ankaji too. Plus, he destroyed an underground slavery ring in Fuhren and took that dragon girl, Myu, back to her mother. If you ask me, I think he’s saved more of the world than we have.”

“That’s... true, but...”

“I’m sure... he only did it for the sake of Yue and the others close to him, but... Fufu. At this rate, he might just end up saving the world and killing the gods while on his quest to get back home.”

“I kind of feel bad for the gods now...” Shizuku snickered. As ridiculous as it sounded, it seemed like something that Hajime might really do.

Though he didn’t want to admit it, he couldn’t really deny it either, so he settled for making a lame joke.

The two stood there in silence. Shizuku knew Kouki was trying to wrestle with his own feelings, so she didn’t say anything.

It felt like hours passed.

At some point, Shizuku could feel Fernir change direction. *That’s odd. There shouldn’t be anything blocking our path this high up.* They should have been flying in a straight line to the empire, so if they’d changed directions, something must have happened. Kouki and Shizuku exchanged a look.

“What do you think happened?”

“Let’s go back inside for now.”

The two of them nodded to each other and hurried back inside.

By the time Shizuku and Kouki arrived at the bridge, everyone else was already there. They were crowding around a large crystal placed in the center of the room. It looked like everything was starting to heat up...

“What happened?”

“Oh, hi Shizuku-chan. We spotted some people being chased by imperial soldiers,” Kaori explained.

She pointed to the cube-shaped crystal, which showed a pair of

rabbitmen being chased through a ravine by a group of imperial soldiers.

The cube crystal was another one of Hajime's artifacts.

He'd crafted it out of sightstone, ore enchanted with Farsight, and transferstone, ore enchanted with magic that let it display things seen by other objects linked to it.

Hajime had equipped Fernir with a number of external camera-type crystals, and then linked them to the crystal in the bridge. That way, he could see everything going on outside from here. He'd dubbed this artifact SCD, or Solid Crystal Display.

Shizuku leaned closer to the crystal and nodded in understanding when she saw what was displayed. Two rabbitmen girls were running for dear life through a dry ravine.

But they were clearly exhausted, and the imperial soldiers were on horseback. It was only a matter of time before they were caught.

Behind the horseman was another imperial squadron carting along a few large wagons. According to Liliana, they were the kind used to transport slaves within the empire.

From the looks of it, the two rabbit girls were escaped slaves. That, or the imperials had run into them by coincidence while transporting the slaves they'd already caught back.

"I see. So that's why you changed course..." Shizuku muttered to herself.

Normally Hajime would just ignore something like this, but there was a possibility they might be someone Shea knew. He couldn't afford to ignore their plight if that was the case, so he'd decided to at least get a closer look.

Kouki paled and shouted, "They look like they're in trouble! We have to go save them!" He looked ready to jump down at a moment's notice, nevermind that they were thousands of meters in the air.

However, Hajime ignored Kouki's outburst and frowned suspiciously at the crystal.

"Hey, Nagumo! You're not planning on just leaving them like that are you!? If you're not gonna save them, I will! Let me off this thing!"

"Wait up... Hey Shea, aren't those two..."

"Hm? Wait... I recognize those two!"

Hajime held Kouki back as he talked to Shea.

He zoomed the image in to get a better look and Shea's bunny ears twitched as she recognized them.

"How can you guys act so unconcerned!? Aren't those your comrades down there, Shea-san!? Shouldn't you be worried!?"

"Sorry, but could you shut up for a bit, please?"

Shea's bluntness stunned Kouki into silence.

By the way, the reason Kouki used -san with her was because she

had insisted. When they'd first met Kouki had introduced himself with a smile and attempted to act as familiar as possible, but Shea had smiled and demanded he use honorifics. It was the first time Kouki had ever been terrified of someone's smile.

"Hajime-san, I'm sure of it. That's Lana-san and Mina-san!"

"Thought so. They changed so much during training it'd be hard to forget them. Going by their expressions, and those movements... I see."

Hajime folded his arms and mused to himself.

He watched as the two rabbit girls, Lana and Mina, stumbled to a halt, seemingly exhausted. They'd stopped in the center of the ravine, at its widest point.

Kouki returned to his senses and stalked to the bridge's exit. If no one else was going to help, he would. Though they were quite far up, he was sure he'd at least be able to distract the imperial soldiers with his magic.

"Wait up, Amanogawa. It'll be fine."

"Wh-What are you saying!? Those two frail girls are about to be captured!"

Hajime just grinned in response.

Still staring at the crystal, he said in an amused tone, "Frail? Hardly. Those two are... Haulias." *What the heck is he talking about?* Kouki thought to himself, puzzled. "Ah!" someone gasped in surprise.

Kouki hurried back to the crystal and saw something he could hardly believe. Imperial corpses littered the ravine; most of the soldiers had either been beheaded or shot in the back of the head by arrows.

"Huh?" Kouki wasn't the only one surprised, everyone's jaws had dropped open.

The students especially, as this was their first time seeing such a brutal slaughter.

Liliana and her guards were surprised too, but that was because they'd seen something that defied the logic of this world.

They watched in silence as events continued to unfold down below. Seeing as the pursuit party hadn't returned, the commander of the transport unit ordered a few scouts to reconnoiter.

It didn't take long for the scouts to stumble across the corpses of their allies. The two bunny girls were trembling in what appeared to be fear at the center of the bloodbath.

The scouts' expressions grew grim, and they began yelling at the bunny girls. Though the crystal didn't transmit sound, it was obvious they were interrogating the two bunny girls.

Normally they would have been more cautious, but not only had they just seen the corpses of their dead comrades, they didn't expect a

pair of weak rabbit girls to pose a threat. Shaken as they were, they didn't realize that the bunny girls were luring them into a trap.

They paid for their carelessness with their lives.

Just as one of the scouts tried to grab Lana's ears, an arrow flew out of nowhere, catching the man behind him in the back of the head.

The man spasmed once and slumped to the ground with a thud. The first scout turned around, wondering what happened.

The moment he took his eyes off Lana she leaped at him, pulling a knife seemingly out of nowhere. With one clean stroke, she parted the scout's head from his shoulders.

The other girl, Mina, ducked low underneath the headless corpse and rushed at the final scouts. The confused scout didn't even have a chance to react as Mina beheaded him as well.

Kouki paled and covered his mouth as he watched the scout's head bounce across the ground. Suzu fainted, and Ryutarou had to catch her before she fell to the ground.

Unable to comprehend how a few rabbit girls had managed to kill the empire's soldiers, Liliana and her guards turned to Shea. *You're not the only one that's super strong!?* Their gazes seemed to say.

"Don't worry, I'm the only one who's this strong. There's no way there'd be a bunch of people like me out there. Lana-san and the others just trained a lot. Hajime-san's training regimen from hell can turn anyone into that."

"....." Everyone turned to Hajime. *You again!?* Their reproachful gazes seemed to say. Hajime awkwardly turned away.

While that was going on, the battle between the empire and the Haulia drew to a close. The soldiers who'd remained behind originally had also discovered the slaughter now.

They came to a halt as they saw their dead comrades scattered across the ravine.

Obviously they couldn't just trample over their comrades bodies, but even if they could have they were too shaken to take action.

And the Haulia lost no time in taking advantage of the empire's hesitation. Or rather, they'd planned things to create such an opening in the first place.

There were thirteen soldiers left. A mere three Haulia burst out of hiding to charge them. Together with Lana, Mina, and the rabbitman sniper who'd killed the scout, that made six people in total. In other words, they were outnumbered two to one.

However, by the time the soldiers had drawn their weapons, four of them had already lost their heads, while a fifth had been shot through the forehead.

The Haulia were relentless. They moved with fluid grace and impeccable coordination, chipping away at the soldiers' formation.

When one of the soldiers moved to block a sword thrust from one rabbitman, another popped up from the side and sliced his head off.

A second later, a hail of arrows came flying at the soldiers. Focused as they were on deflecting the deadly barrage, they didn't notice when another Haulia got into their blind spot and took out another one of their number.

The rabbitman then kicked his adversary's decapitated head toward another soldier, fouling his sword arm. Distracted by the enemy in front of him, the soldier didn't even notice when another rabbitman got behind him and chopped his head off.

If they focused to the enemy on their right, the soldiers would get assassinated from the left. If they tried to take on the arrows to their front, they'd be stabbed from behind.

It wasn't long before all of the soldiers were lying dead on the ground.

"A-Are those really rabbitmen..."

"You've gotta be kidding me..."

"Rabbitmen are scary..."

Ominous muttering filled the bridge.

"Oh, looks like they've gotten a lot more skilled. I see they kept up their training. Though, they let their guard down a little at the end." Hajime ignored Kouki, who looked like he might throw up, and the girls who were hugging each other in terror, and pulled out Schlagen.

He walked over to the windshield, retracted the glass, and took aim outside.

They were still a good five kilometers away from the scene of the battle. Yue and the others watched calmly as he put his eye to the scope and adjusted his shot. Then he silently pulled the trigger.

There was a loud bang, and a streak of red light shot out of the barrel.

It struck the last remaining soldier who'd stayed behind inside one of the wagons and was just about to finish casting a high-level spell at the rabbitmen.

His head was blown clean off, as if there had never been anything attached to his neck in the first place. Extreme heat cauterized the wound, and no blood spilled out of his neck. The corpse looked like a doll who's head had been detached.

Hajime breathed a satisfied sigh and shouldered his rifle.

"H-How could you tell he was there?"

"Are you psychic or something, Nagumo-kun?"

Suzu, who'd regained consciousness, and Ryutarou exclaimed in surprise.

"If it had been a physical attack I probably wouldn't have been able to tell... but since he was casting magic, I could sense it." Hajime

pointed to his eyepatch. His Demon Eye possessed the powers of Farsight and the ability to detect mana, which was how he'd sensed the ambush.

"Oh, so it wasn't just to look cool! I thought you might be one of those, you know..."

"Yeah, I thought it was like a fashion statement or something... Sorry, man! I should have known you wouldn't just wear an eyepatch cause you thought it looked cool—"

Two gunshots echoed through the bridge. The first hit Ryutarou squarely in the forehead, while the other ricocheted off the wall and hit Suzu in the butt. They were rubber bullets so they didn't leave any lasting injuries, but they still hurt.

Ryutarou and Suzu both let out squeals of pain and leaped backward. Suzu covered her butt and hopped around in pain while Ryutarou cradled his forehead and staggered about.

"Don't you dare call me a chuuni. I'll shoot you." *You already shot them.* No one dared to say that aloud though.

Hajime turned back to the crystal display. The Haulia were all staring at the headless soldier in shock. They then looked up, following the trajectory of the bullet back to its origin and saw Fernir.

Normally someone would be wary when they saw a strange flying object shooting bullets at people, but the Haulia all broke out in smiles.

The sniper, a rabbit boy with a crossbow shouldered his weapon and brought his hand up in a rough salute.

They all could tell who was inside that strange flying contraption. In a way, it made sense. After all, those streaks of red light were their boss' trademark. The others all followed the boy's example and gave Hajime respectful salutes.

Back in the airship, everyone once again stared at Hajime. This time in a mixture of exasperation and amazement.

Liliana couldn't fathom how Hajime had turned the gentle, peace-loving rabbitmen into such a crack team of killers.

"Hajime-san, Hajime-san! We need to go down there. If they're attacking people outside the sea of trees... there's no telling what kind of recklessness they've gotten up to..." Shea urged Hajime to go down.

It was obvious from what they'd seen that the Haulia had lured the imperial soldiers into that trap on purpose.

Shea was worried that her family had gotten so addicted to violence that they'd started rampaging outside of the Haltina Woods.

"From the looks of it, I don't think you need to be that worried." Though he said that, Hajime, too, was curious as to why the rabbitmen were killing people out here. Moreover, he didn't want to leave Shea worrying, so he changed course and began rapidly

descending.

When they stepped out of the airship, Hajime was greeted by six Haulia standing at attention, with a group of terrified beastmen cowering behind them.

There must have been over a hundred, all of various races. Rabbitmen, Foxmen, Dogmen, Catmen, and even Elves huddled together. The majority of them were women and children, and they were all collared and shackled. As Liliana had expected, it had been an imperial slave caravan that they'd targeted.

"H-Hey Kaorin, Shizushizu, is it just me, or do those beastmen look like they just saw a bunch of aliens come out of a spaceship?"

"Hm? Suzu-chan, are you calling us aliens?"

"Well they're definitely face to face with the unidentified right now."

Kaori blinked in confusion, while Shizuku thought to herself *Kaori's the one who looks most like an alien here probably.*

Yue had an unearthly beauty to her as well, but Kaori's silver hair made her seem even more alien. If it wasn't for the fact that Shea was with them, all of the beastmen would probably have focused their attention on Kaori.

Hajime ignored the beastmen, most of whom were stunned speechless, with the rest eyeing him warily, and turned to the rabbit boy with the crossbow. The rabbit boy sauntered over, straightened his back, and saluted again.

"It's an honor to see you again, Boss! I've been waiting eagerly for your return! I never expected you would come riding an unknown craft, but... allow me, Baltfeld the Executioner, to express my admiration for your dramatic entrance! Allow me to also thank you for your earlier assistance."

"Yo, it's been a while. I'm thinking with how skilled you guys've gotten you would have been fine even if I didn't interfere. From the looks of it, even if he'd gotten his spell off you could have handled it. Gotta say, you've improved a lot."

Hajime grinned at the boy who called himself Baltfeld the Executioner. His real name was Par, and he was only ten years old. Lana, Mina, and the three other rabbitmen all rushed over and saluted as well, their eyes welling up with emotion.

They clacked their heels together and said in unison, "We are honored to receive such praise, Sir!" Their voices resonated throughout the ravine.

Though tears pooled in their eyes, they refused to let them fall in front of their beloved boss.

After all, they had to be strong like him.

The rabbitmen looked up at the sky, willing their tears back into

their eyes. In fact they put so much effort into it their eyes became a little bloodshot.

Though Hajime, Yue, and Shea were used to this by now, Tio, Kaori, Kouki, and Liliana all shrank back in disgust.

“Umm, it’s been a while guys! I’m glad you’re all still doing well. By the way, where’s my father? Are you guys the only ones here, Par-kun? Also, why are you fighting the empire all the way out here?”

“Calm down, Elder Sister Shea. It’s a long story. It’s only the six of us here, but it’ll take time to explain the rest. Let’s go somewhere we can discuss this at length. Also, Elder Sister. My name isn’t Par-kun anymore, it’s Baltfeld the Executioner. Do try not to get that mixed up.”

“What? I’m not even sure what to say to that. I can’t believe you’re still using that ridiculous name... Lana-san, Mina-san, could you say something to him for me too?”

Shea rubbed her temples and lamented the fact that Par was still acting edgy.

Still, Par was right that this wasn’t the place to discuss things in length. So Shea turned to Lana and Mina, two girls who had been like older sisters to her, and asked them to help out.

Sadly, reality never works out the way people want it to.

“Shea, my name isn’t Lana anymore... I am now Lanainferina the Swift Gale.”

“Lana-san!? What are you...”

Lana had always been the level-headed one of the tribe. This was the last thing Shea had expected to hear out of her mouth.

Worse, the other Haulia all chimed in with their new names as well. Coordination was their strong suit, and now they brought it to bear against Shea.

“I am Minasteria the Skybreaker!”

“Huh!?”

“I am Yaozelius the Phantom!”

“Huh!?”

“I am Yorgandr the Silent Blade!”

“Huh!?”

“Hmph, and I’m Riquidbriek the Squall!”

“Huh!?”

All six of them struck Jojo-esque poses as they introduced themselves.

Despair filled Shea’s heart. She groaned softly, unable to formulate a response.

It appeared chuuni names were in fashion among the Haulia right now. If the six of them were like this, the rest of the tribe had probably adopted new names as well.

Par aside, they had all taken the first half of their real name and used it as a base for their new chuuni names.

Poor Shea watched on in horror as her family grinned and struck the most embarrassing poses she had ever seen.

For Shea's sake and his own, Hajime decided he needed to put a stop to this nonsense. He sighed and took a deep breath, but before he could say anything, Par, that is Baltfeld the Executioner, delivered the coup de grâce on Hajime.

"By the way boss, which do you prefer? Rondo of Red Death, or White Fang Hurricane?"

"...What?"

"For your nickname. The whole clan spent ten days in heated debate about what to call you, and eventually we settled on these two options. But we still couldn't decide which one was better, so, we had a mock battle and the winner's side would determine the name. But that ended in a tie, so... we decided to leave the decision to you when you finally returned. Personally, I think Red Rondo of Death sounds much cooler."

Par said that with fervor that didn't befit a ten-year-old.

"Wait, why do I need to have a nickname at all?"

"Boss, I personally believe White Fang Hurricane suits you much better."

Lana countered, her tone strangely obsessed.

"Wait, listen to me. I don't really..."

"How could you say that, Lanainferina the Swift Gale. Red Rondo of Death is clearly a superior name!" Mina exclaimed, with bloodshot eyes.

"Hey seriously, cut it..." "Indeed! Those crimson sparks that dance through the air every time boss fires one of his magnificent weapons are his trademark! It's only natural that he be named after them!" Yor added, making a fist and raising it high.

"Please stop, you're embarrassing—"

"Come now, Yorgandr the Silent Blade. If we're talking about trademarks, it would have to be that stark white hair of his and the way his weapons lash out about like the fangs of a ferocious beast. His attacks strike with the force of a hurricane, so of course White Fang Hurricane is the only name that fits. How can you not understand that no other words perfectly encapsulate boss' splendor? Have you lost your mind!?"

"You said it. This is why the Rondo faction disgusts me." Yao and Riqui shrugged their shoulders and sighed in an exaggerated fashion.

"Gah..." Hajime groaned in despair and slumped to the ground next to Shea.

Even the monster of the abyss couldn't handle such an

embarrassing display. Hajime and Shea lay kneeling on the ground, strange white ghost-versions of themselves leaking out of their mouths.

Behind them, Shizuku couldn't contain herself and started chuckling.



“Sh-Shizushizu, don’t laugh at them, it’s rude— Puhaha!”

“B-But you’re laughing at them too, Suzu... Haha... I guess chunnibyou’s contagious... Hahahaha.”

By the time Hajime came back to his senses, the two of them were trying their best to hold in their laughter. It wasn’t working.

At least Yue and Kaori aren’t laughing at me. The two of them were just smiling uncomfortably instead.

Tio didn’t understand what was happening at all, so she just looked at them blankly.

What hurt Hajime’s pride the most though, was Kouki and Ryutarou’s pitying looks.

Hajime’s embarrassment reached its peak, and then boiled over into anger. He hit Par and the others with a barrage of gum bullets to get them into line, and gave Shizuku and Suzu a venomous glare.

“Just so you know Yaegashi, I’m going to put you into twintails later and record how you look.”

“Huh!?”

“Taniguchi, I’m going to squish you down a few centimeters so you’re even shorter.”

“What!?”

The laughter stopped instantly. Shizuku and Suzu shivered in fear. Even if it wasn’t fair, they knew they wouldn’t be able to get out of their punishment if they made Hajime mad.

And Hajime was definitely mad.

Suzu turned to Kouki and Ryutarou, her gaze clearly saying “Why only us!?” The two boys were staring pointedly at the sky. They had a few embarrassing stories buried in their own past, so they could understand. For once, they sympathized with him.

A gentle voice interrupted Hajime.

“Umm... Excuse me.” One of the beastmen picked their way across the Haulia rolling around in pain on the floor and walked up to Hajime, preventing him from exacting his revenge.

He turned to see a slender, beautiful girl with wavy, long blonde hair and striking jade-green eyes. She had long ears that tapered to a point; she was an elf.

Her face reminded Hajime of the elven elder he’d met in Verbergen, Ulfric. He nodded to her, indicating that she could go on.

“You are Hajime Nagumo-dono, correct?”

“Hm? Yeah, that’s me...”

Hajime answered hesitantly. *Why does she know my name?* The girl breathed a sigh of relief and put a hand to her chest.

The shackles on her wrists clanged loudly as she did so.

They looked rather painful. Her ankles were chafed bloody from

the restraints that had been put on them. Every time she walked she winced as they rubbed against her wounds.

“Then would I be right in assuming you won’t be making us into slaves? My grandfather told me that for better or worse, you see all races as equal. And that you weren’t one to torment beastmen for simple pleasure...”

“Your grandfather? Wait, is your grandfather Ulfric?”

“Yes. My apologies for not introducing myself sooner. I am the granddaughter of Elder Ulfric of Verbergen, Altina Heipyst.”

“If the empire managed to kidnap an elder’s granddaughter... things must be pretty bad over there.”

If she was Ulfric’s granddaughter, that effectively made her the princess of all elves. Which would mean she’d be much better guarded than almost anyone else. On top of that, she would have known of all of the secret escape routes.

The fact that she’d been captured despite all of that meant that the situation in Haltina was grave indeed.

What if they did something to the Grand Tree? Worried, Hajime realized it was of utmost importance that he hear Par’s story.

He turned to the boy, who had since recovered from Hajime’s rubber bullets and said, “Hey, get everyone together. I’ll take you all back to the sea of trees.”

“Yes, sir! Oh yeah, boss. I need to get in touch with the others near the imperial capital. Would it be alright if I split off from your group halfway?”

Hajime and the others were still a good deal west of the capital. The fact that there was a slave transport here meant that it hadn’t come back from a trip to the sea of trees. These people had left the capital for some other destination and had run into Par and the others here.

Which meant that originally Par’s squad had been scouting the capital for some reason or another, and had come chasing this caravan when they’d learned of its departure.

After putting all the pieces together, Hajime gave his consent.

“Yeah, that’s fine with me. There’s a few people I needed to drop off at the capital anyway. I can drop you off close to there too.”

“Thank you very much, sir! Come on, you louts! Boss said he’ll take you to the sea of trees! You better be damn grateful he’s willing to spend his precious time on you! Follow me if you wanna get home!”

Even grown men flinched at the vehemence in Par’s voice.

Still, he was promising to get that home, and that gave them hope. Despite their fear and unease, the beastmen all dutifully followed Par’s instructions. Seeing that he had everything under

control, Hajime and the others began heading back to Fernir.

Just then, Hajime heard a cute scream behind him. Altina had tripped on her shackles.

She fell forward, her arms flailing wildly. She tried to angle herself to fall into Hajime's back, but he stepped to the side without even looking back.

She crashed into the ground with a painful thud and let out a very unladylike squeal of surprise.

The other beastmen watched on in surprise. Some of them thought of going over to help, but they were too intimidated by Hajime to attempt it.

"Hm?" Finally, Hajime turned around. He saw a young girl trembling on the ground, though whether it was in pain or in embarrassment he couldn't tell.

It appeared he hadn't actually dodged Altina on purpose. He'd unconsciously stepped aside because he'd sensed something heading his way.

Had Hajime been a true hero and gentleman, he would have hurried to help her up. But this was Hajime.

"If you don't hurry, Par'll leave you behind." He said curtly.

Hajime truly was a monster of the abyss. For better or worse, he treated everyone he didn't know equally. And that didn't include just race, but gender as well. The only exception he made was for children.

Of course, that didn't mean he was nice to everyone equally. Rather, that he was equally cold to them.

"You know, Hajime-kun. While I'm glad you're not automatically nice to every girl you meet, you could still..." Kaori said hesitantly.

"Hajime-san. Surely you could be a little nicer to people." Shea said with a bitter smile.

"Whoa. He's so blunt to everyone who's not Yue-oneesama or the others... What a heartless guy."

"Nagumo-kun..."

Suzu and Shizuku looked at Hajime in disgust.

"Nagumo. You're a guy, you can't just do that."

"I won't blame ya for dodging, but you could have at least asked her if she was alright."

Kouki and Ryutarou berated him as well.

Even Liliana, who was from a country that discriminated against beastmen, looked a little sorry for Altina.

"Yue, do you think this is my fault too?" When in doubt, Hajime always turned to Yue. His eye twitched a little when he asked that.

In response, Yue said, "Hm? I don't think so really. You were like this to Shea in the beginning too."

"Now that you mention it, that's right! If Hajime-san's nice to

Altina-san now, I'll feel like I got the short end of the stick!" Shea's bunny ears flopped back and forth as she said that. Everyone looked sympathetically at her.

There was one other person who chimed in her support of Hajime's actions.

"You did nothing wrong, Master! This is in fact how you should always act! By the way, do you think you could..." Tio sidled up to him and threw herself at his feet.

She spared Altina, who was still lying on the ground, a quick glance before looking up at Hajime.

"S-Step on me, please?" Altina twitched in disgust as she watched Tio blush to the tips of her ears.

When everyone is watching it's even more exciting than usual!

"....." Hajime shivered.

Two beautiful girls were prostrating themselves before him. Just going off circumstantial evidence, it made him look like a massive sadist.

Annoyed, Hajime completely ignored Tio and went to help Altina to her feet.

"U-Umm..." After being hauled unceremoniously to her feet, Altina tried to stammer her thanks. Before she could get the words out though, the other beastmen interrupted her.

"I-Impossible! Boss gave someone a hand!? He's never even helped us before!"

"Curse you, Altina!" The Haulia cried out in rage, causing Altina to flinch.

"I only helped 'cause I was tired of people getting mad at me, but that just caused another problem... Maybe I should just blow everyone away..." Though his voice was barely a whisper, it carried across the entire ravine.

Everyone present paled instantly.

A few of them looked warily up at the sky. They didn't doubt that Hajime would bring that pillar of light down on them if they made him too mad.

Sighing, Hajime knelt in front of Altina.

"N-Nagumo-dono?"

"Don't move."

Flustered, Altina was unsure how to respond. And Hajime's next actions only served to confuse her further. He reached a hand out to her feet, or to be more exact her ankle cuffs. Altina stood stock still, her gaze darting about.

This was the first time in her life a human had knelt in front of her. Moreover, Altina had grown up a very sheltered girl. Outside of her family, no man had ever touched her before. Her confusion was

understandable.

Worried, she watched as crimson sparks shot out of Hajime's hands. A second later, her worry turned to surprise as her shackles soundlessly came off.

"I guess since beastmen can't use magic, they just used regular metal for their restraints. There's nothing here inhibiting the flow of mana. The metal's pretty tough, so I don't think you'd be able to break free with brute force... but it's not so sturdy that I'd want to use it for my transmutation..." Hajime muttered to himself as he got to his feet. This time, he took Altina by the hands.

Altina knew what to expect now, so she was able to calm down.

"It's so pretty..." she muttered, looking down at the flurry of crimson sparks connecting her hands to Hajime's.

As a result of his constant training, Hajime's mana had become more vibrant than before.

Once her handcuffs were off, Hajime moved to the collar around her neck. It was a slave collar.

Altina blushed as Hajime's serious gaze met hers, and his fingers brushed against the nape of her neck.

"Here, no complaints now, right? Anyone who's got a problem can take it up with Donner." After getting Altina's collar off, Hajime swept his gaze over Liliana, Suzu, Kouki, Kaori, and all of the beastmen.

They all looked away awkwardly.

With a sigh, Hajime turned back to Altina's removed shackles and began transmuting. He turned the lumps of metal into a set of keys.

Once he was done, he chuckled them over to Par.

"There's no way all of those shackles have unique locks. These keys should work for all of them I think. I don't want anyone thinking something stupid like I'm a slave trader transporting goods or anything. Get everyone out of those things."

"Yes, sir! Thank you for your generosity!"

Par gave Hajime a crisp salute, and he nodded in return. Hajime then turned around and headed back to the ship.

Yue, Kaori, Shea, and Tio smiled to themselves as they followed after him. Shizuku and Liliana seemed somewhat stunned, while Kouki didn't know what to make of this.

He is quite the interesting character. Altina thought to herself as she watched Hajime's back recede in the distance.

Once all of the beastmen were freed and had boarded Fernir, Hajime started up the airship.

Most of the adult beastmen were so shocked that they were traveling in a flying vessel that they passed the trip in a semi-catatonic state. The children however loved the Fernir. No matter their race, kids everywhere were the same. They ran around the deck, excited to

see the world from such a high vantage point.

They were all smiles as they played around; the dark expressions they'd had when they'd been prisoners of the empire were long gone. It was as if they were back in Verbergen.

Altina was watching the children play when her attendant, another elf girl, came up to her and asked, "Altina-sama. Do you think he'll really return us home?" Her voice trembled with a mixture of fear and hope.

Altina kept her eyes on the children as she responded.

"He's exactly the man my grandfather described him to be. For better or worse, he has no preconceptions about what kind of people beastmen are—no, perhaps it would be more accurate to say he has no interest in what kind of people beastmen are. If it suits his convenience, he won't hesitate to save us, nor does he have any qualms about letting us ride on such an amazing and valuable artifact. In fact, he gave us free reign of the entire vessel."

"I understand, but... he's human. On top of that, he was the one who crippled Jin-sama, the former bearman elder, wasn't he? What if..." Altina shook her head, cutting her suspicious attendant off.

"Regardless of his intentions, there is nothing we can do except trust in him. If it comes down to it, I will offer him my body to protect my people..."

"Altina-sama..."

Indeed, they had no other choice but to trust in Hajime. After all, he was powerful enough to create an artifact of this magnitude. They couldn't oppose him no matter how hard they tried. It was both tragic and admirable how Altina was willing to sacrifice herself for her people. At least it seemed so until she opened her mouth again.

"B-By the way, do all men enjoy... s-stepping on women?"

"Come again?"

"I have never been stepped on by someone before, so I am unsure of how to make myself a good stepping subject. Would you happen to have any experience in the matter?"

"Absolutely not."

Altina's attendant replied in a curt tone, having lost all respect for her master.

Altina blushed bright red and said, "If possible, I would prefer my first time to be gentle..."

"The only person who would be stepping on women would be an uncultured brute! Why would they ever be gentle!? Return to your senses, Altina-sama! Why are you assuming you'll be stepped on at all!?"

"I just don't know what to do. Perhaps I should ask that beautiful black-haired lady to teach me how it's done..."

“Come back to us, Altina-sama! You can’t let yourself be sucked into that realm! And stop blushing like that! Oh, Ulfric-sama, your poor granddaughter has been corrupted!” A single wail cut through the joyous laughter of children playing.

Around the same time as that discussion, Hajime was in the bridge, listening to Par’s report of what had happened to Haltina.

“Alright, so what were you doing that far out of the forest? If Ulfric’s granddaughter was kidnapped, does that mean Verbergen’s been taken over by the empire?”

“You would be correct, Boss.”

Par stood ramrod straight as he replied.

Apparently the Haulia with him were all part of his unit, the Baltfeld Squad. Par had been chosen as the squad leader because of his overall leadership skills and his impressive sniping ability. It was hard to believe he was still just a ten-year-old boy.

“Are you... certain? How did the empire navigate through the fog?” Liliana asked hesitantly.

She was curious as to how they’d done it of course, but if even the empire had developed some new weapon or magic and not told Heiligh, that spelled trouble for the kingdom. Her youthful features scrunched up in worry.

Par glanced over at Liliana before shooting Hajime a questioning look.

Liliana’s guards bristled at his insolence.

Par ignored their glares and kept his attention focused solely on Hajime.

“Princess, let me handle the questions. Things will just get more complicated if you stick your head in.”

“Ugh. I suppose you’re right... I shouldn’t have run my mouth. I’ll leave this to you, Nagumo-san.”

Liliana hung her head and took a few steps back.

For most of her life, Liliana had been a devout follower of the Holy Church. Until recently, she’d believed that beastmen really were an inferior race. But now that she’d learned the truth about Ehit, her disdain for the beastmen had all but vanished.

It pained Liliana both that Par had ignored her, and that trying to get closer to the beastmen and perhaps bridge the gap between their races would be a bad move for her politically.

Though Par hadn’t ignored her because she was a human. He was just a disciplined soldier who wouldn’t report to anyone other than his superior without express permission. In other words, this was all Hajime’s fault too. There was still some time until Liliana discovered that though.

“Par, tell me everything that happened. Start from the beginning.”

“Boss. I would like to respectfully remind you that my name is Baltfeld.”

Some things Par wouldn’t budge on, even for his beloved boss.

“Fine, Baltfeld. Give me your report.”

“Yes, sir. First, you need to know that it was the demons, not the empire, that started this.” Par stopped there and took a few moments to organize his thoughts. After sorting through everything he’d seen personally, the reports he’d heard from Verbergen survivors, and the information he’d tortured out of prisoners, Par began his story.

An ominous gloom had hung over the sea of trees the morning of the attack.

Most of the beastmen instinctively felt that something was wrong, though they couldn’t quite explain what was making them so uneasy.

The rabbitmen however, could tell. They were the weakest of the beastmen races, and didn’t possess sturdy bodies, or powerful claws or talons, or overwhelming physical might like the other beastmen. They feared fighting more than anything, and were known by all to be a kind and peaceful race.

Which was precisely why they were the best at sensing danger and hiding themselves.

The Haulia—the abnormal rabbitman tribe that had honed their combat skills along with their stealth and perception abilities—had been even better equipped to pick up on the threat ahead of time.

“My ears throb...” A young Haulia boy, Par, perched atop a thick branch and listened intently, his bunny ears twitching.

Originally, he’d been a cute child who all the older girls of the clan had fawned over. Right now though, he looked like a grizzled war veteran.

“There’s a chill in the air... It reminds me of the day we fought against those imperial scum.” Nea Haulia replied in a smooth voice. She brushed a strand of navy-blue hair out of her eyes. Her gaze was as sharp as Par’s.

Like Par, Nea was also only ten years old. She was one of his good friends.

Most of the Haulia clan were patrolling the forest on Cam, the chief of the Haulia’s, orders.

They weren’t doing this for the other beastmen. None of the Haulia had any love for them, but they had no intention of abandoning their fellow rabbitmen.

Which was why they constantly patrolled the area around Verbergen and the other sizable settlements.

“Yeah. But things are different now. We won’t let them take any

of our family away from us.”

“Exactly. This time, we’ll chop their heads off. But you know, I didn’t think they’d just barge into our sanctuary like this.”

For a ten-year-old girl, she sure said some violent things.

A second later, the two of them turned toward the same direction.

“Did you feel that?”

“Barely. But that doesn’t seem like...” The fur on their rabbit ears stood on end. Neither of them had sensed a presence like this before.

They nodded to each other and dashed off toward it.

They barely disturbed the thick fog as they leaped from branch to branch.

“I hear screams!”

“It sounds like there’s fighting up ahead. But... what’s that other noise?” A strange noise pierced their eardrums. It sounded like the flapping of an insect’s wings, but more high-pitched and headache-inducing.

Par and Nea masked their presence as they neared the site of the battle.

When they arrived, they found a bearman and wolfman lying on the ground in pools of their own blood.

There was so much of it, the floor was a sea of red.

“This is... terrible.”

“Some of them were cut clean in half. How sharp does your sword have to be to do that?”

Par and Nea grimaced as they examined the two corpses. From the looks of it, the bearman and wolfman had been patrol guards for Verbergen.

A second later, their bunny ears shot up.

“Ah!? Get down!”

“Roger!” The two of them leaped in opposite directions.

Something shot past the spot they’d been standing in seconds ago. Neither of them could tell what it was. It flew by so fast all they could make out was a blur.

As they landed, the tree behind them slid diagonally downward, then crashed to the ground with a resounding thud.

“Baltfeld!”

“Tch!”

A two-meter tall creature rushed at Par from behind. This one wasn’t moving as fast as the last, and Par could make out the details. However, he didn’t have time to do anything more before he had to dodge out of the way.

He was up against a massive insect with spikes running down its carapace. It looked like some kind of deformed rhinoceros beetle. The creature spurted jets of mana from underneath its wing cases, which

was what allowed it to propel itself so fast. At top speed, it was able to reach one hundred kilometers an hour.

The insect slammed into the tree behind Par and blew it apart like it was made of jelly.

At the same time, another creature hurtled toward Nea. The moment she heard it, her months of training took over, and she threw herself to the ground faster than she could think. It flew inches above her head, narrowly missing her.

“Are you alright, Neaschtatrum!?”

“Negative! That bastard shaved the tips of my rabbit ears off! I’ll kill the fucker!”

Nea’s cute face transformed into that of a demon as she watched a few of her hairs fall to the ground.

Neaschtatrum was the nickname she’d chosen for herself, by the way. Her full title was Neaschtratum the Butcher. Not the name one would expect of a ten-year-old girl.

Her bloodthirsty scowl vanished when she saw just how many monsters they were up against though.

“Baltfeld.” Par had seen them too. Expression grim, he gave out orders.

“We can’t win. Our biggest priority is getting this information back. Retreat. I’ll back you up.”

“Yes, sir.” Nea replied curtly. As veteran soldiers, they knew a protracted conversation would just waste time.

Bloodlust welled up within Par, and he manipulated it to make himself seem more threatening than he was.

At the same time, Nea faded away into the mist.

One of the monsters shot after her, determined not to let her escape. But as it began closing on Nea— “Gyaaah!?” It let out a bloodcurling scream and veered headfirst into a tree.

Now that it wasn’t moving, Par could tell the super-fast monster was a giant bee with six pairs of thin wings.

Par’s bolt had struck true, and the bee’s abdomen had an arrow sticking out of it.

“It doesn’t matter how fast you are if your movements are predictable!” Par shouldered his crossbow and smiled triumphantly.

He had guessed that the bee would go for Nea, and so had used his superhuman hearing to ascertain when the bee started moving and then fire his arrow at where he predicted it would be. The boy who had once loved flowers had become the Haulia’s greatest sniper.

Nea was nowhere to be seen. She’d masked her presence so well not even Par could tell where she was, and had likely already distanced herself from the battlefield.

Three of the beetle monsters charged Par from different angles.

“Whoa, looks like I should get out of here too. What are these things, anyway?” Par tied a rope to the end of a crossbow bolt and loaded it. He fired it above him and pressed a button in the crossbow’s side. It started winding up the rope, taking Par with it. He shot up into the air, and the three beetles below him all rammed into each other with a sickening thud.

As he alighted on the branch above, Par heard a swarm of insects flying toward him. On top of that, other monsters were following behind them this time. Beads of cold sweat dripped down his forehead.

“If I don’t get outta here fast, there’s gonna be trouble.” Any normal rabbitman would have just given up on survival at this point. In fact, any beastman would have given up. They’d be praying for mercy right about now.

Par, however, set up a few impromptu booby traps and began his retreat. It was like a game of tag, except the penalty for being caught was death. Despite that, he was grinning fearlessly.

In that moment, he looked just like his beloved boss, the monster of the abyss.

Using his considerable stealth skills to their utmost, Par was able to escape from the army of unknown monsters. While they could learn other things, rabbitmen were still the best at hiding.

Once he was clear, he changed directions and headed back toward his village. But before he arrived, a deep rumbling echoed through the entire forest, stopping him in his tracks.

“Isn’t that... Verbergen’s alarm trumpet?” It was supposed to sound just once a year, when they tested to make sure it still worked. It was only blown when there was a major threat to the city, or to the entire forest.

It appeared this unknown assault was of a large enough magnitude that the capital was in danger.

“Either way, I’ve gotta report to the chief first.” Par dashed off even faster than before, and was home before long. He walked past the boundary of verdren crystals keeping the fog at bay and into the village proper.

Cam was at the central square, listening to reports from a dozen or so people. Nea was there as well.

“Baltfeld!”

“Yo!”

Nea raised a hand in greeting. The Haulia smiled when they saw Par had returned safe and sound.

“I’m glad you’re safe, Baltfeld.”

“Thank you, chief. I have a report to make on a number of new monster species that I spotted.”

“Let’s hear it.”

Cam folded his arms and closed his eyes. He looked like the very picture of a dignified leader.

Par reported everything he’d seen after splitting up with Nea.

Apparently there were quite a few new species in this monster army that had appeared out of nowhere. Naturally there were the bees that shot forward in a straight line, bisecting anything in their path, and the giant beetles who used mana propulsion to charge forward with their sturdy horns. But Par had also spotted butterflies that could shoot heat rays from their wings and another flying creature that could create a strange bell-like noise to control the monsters that originally inhabited the forest.

These new monsters should have been disoriented by the fog, but it seemed that the fog didn’t affect them at all. After all, they’d been able to keep track of Par’s location until he got much further away. In fact, if he hadn’t been part of the rabbitmen race, who were notorious for being able to manipulate their presence freely, he might not have gotten away.

“So they’re all new species. The other squads reported running into monsters that could blend perfectly into the background. Or monsters that lurked in the trees and then attacked with their long limbs. Some of them were poisonous too.”

“I see. And they’re all attacking Verbergen right now.”

“Technically it’s the demons who control those monsters who are behind the assault.”

“Wait, demons!? They’re invading the sea of trees!?”

“It’s a possibility. According to Iorniks’ report, the fog still affects the demons themselves. However, it appears they’ve gotten their hands on an army of monsters who are immune.” The Haulias’ expression grew grim.

As they were brooding over the implications of this, another Haulia girl burst into the square.

“Lanainferina and Minasteria, reporting!” Lana and Mina had been sent to scout out the area around Verbergen and see how they were faring. Everyone’s bunny ears perked up; they were eager to hear the news.

“Verbergen has closed its gates, and is currently fighting to keep the monster army out of its walls. But the city was taken by surprise, and their garrisoned army has already suffered major casualties. The units that had been patrolling to the south have all been wiped out, and morale is low. Considering how powerful these new monsters are, it’s only a matter of time before the city is breached.”

Though everyone had expected that to be the verdict, they still broke out in a buzz of conversation. Sure, the Haulia were banished

from Verbergen. But this was a crisis that might lead to the end of the only beastman nation.

“Don’t panic!” Cam’s voice drowned out the commotion.

The Haulia instantly stood at attention.

Cam glared at them all like a hawk.

“So what if Verbergen is on the brink of collapse? That doesn’t change what we have to do. Those bastards are our enemies, and we kill our enemies. That’s all there is to it. Am I wrong?” Feral grins lit up the faces of the Haulia clansmen.

“Verbergen’s being kind enough to buy us some time. We should make the most of it and complete our preparations. Listen up, Haulias!” None of the rabbitmen seemed perturbed that Cam was treating Verbergen as a disposable distraction.

“Our foe will make their way here eventually. Only fools twiddle their thumbs and wait for death to take them! Let’s show these upstart demons that the Haltina Woods are not to be taken lightly! Gulfstream unit, see to our defenses! Make sure all of our traps are still functioning!”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

“Aidelheid unit, scout out the demon’s numbers!”

“Sir, yes sir!”

“Invisible unit, find out what special characteristics these new monsters have! I want a full report on their attack patterns and the special magic they can wield!”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

“Baltfeld unit, head to Verbergen and provide them with backup! However, keep your actions covert, and focus on buying time! The longer the city holds out, the better it is for us! Retreat once the situation grows too dire, and report back to me!”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

“All remaining units, head to our brethren’s villages and evacuate them to safety! If required, guide them here to our village!”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

“Now, gentlemen. These demons have traveled far from the south just to entertain us. I say they deserve a warm welcome!”

“Yahooooooooooooo!”

This would be the Haulia’s first large-scale war. This time they’d protect their home, their family, and their comrades. This world was unfair and unreasonable, but they’d trained and trained and finally obtained the strength to fight back against it.

They’d been forever ridiculed as the weakest race, but the time to show their true mettle had finally come.

Five hundred meters or so south of where Verbergen’s defensive

line was engaging the demons, another fierce battle was about to break out.

“We’re almost there! Keep going, we have to get as many people to Verbergen as possible!” Gil, the tigerman captain of one of Verbergen’s patrol squads, called out to his men. He was drenched in blood and sweat. His squad was currently protecting a number of villagers as they made the desperate flight to Verbergen. They were survivors from the carnage that had swept over the south of the forest. When the remnants of the southern patrol squads had staggered in and told Gil what was happening, he’d taken his unit to go evacuate any surviving villagers.

“Captain, we won’t make it! Their defensive line is too far!” He’d already made it this far with the refugees.

Gil ground his teeth in frustration.

“Don’t you dare say you can’t do it! We have no choice but to do it! That’s the job we signed up for!”

“But sir, most of the refugees are rabbitmen, no one—”

“Not another word!”

Most of the survivors had been rabbitmen, as they were the best among the beastmen at fleeing. Right now, they were running for their lives. Most of the other beastmen looked down upon them because of how weak they were. Gil couldn’t blame his subordinates for not wanting lay their lives down for the sake of a few rabbitmen, who wouldn’t even be any help in a fight.

Though he himself held no such prejudices against rabbitmen.

“I’ll say it again. We’re going to defend our countrymen to the last. That’s the job we signed up for. At the very least, that’s the oath I swore when I became a warrior of Verbergen. Were yours different?”

“Err... No sir.” Gil’s subordinates sucked in a deep breath and steeled their resolve. Seeing their determination, Gil nodded in satisfaction.

A second later—

“Ah! Move!”

“Huh!?”

Gil pushed his subordinate out of the way just as a giant beetle burst through the fog. He raised his sword, attempting to block the beetle’s horns.

“Gah!?” The beetle rammed into him with such force that he almost blacked out.

Gil skipped across the ground like a stone in a pond before slamming into one of the trees behind him and coming to a rest.

“Captain!” He heard his subordinate call out to him, but he was in too much pain to respond. Vision blurry, he looked up to see the beetle still charging at him. Hitting him hadn’t slowed it down at all.

This is where I die!? Gil ground his teeth in frustration. The beetle was just meters away from him now.

Just as it started to blot out his vision—

“I wonder if this’ll work.” He heard a voice from above.

Right after, the beetle screamed in agony and veered off course, barely missing Gil. There was a loud rumbling and a number of other monsters screeched in the distance. After that, silence.

“Short swords can’t pierce their shells. But their joints are unguarded so we should target those.”

“It looks like the beetles are at their weakest when they open their carapaces to charge. That’s the best time to attack them.”

“Their special magic appears to be jettisoning mana to increase the speed of their charge. The organs on either side of their wings are used to control their speed and direction. By destroying one or the other, you can force them to lose control.”

“We’ve analyzed this species enough. Let’s move on to other monsters.”

Grimacing in pain, Gil craned his neck up. A number of figures were perched on the branches above him.

Upon closer inspection, he realized they all had bunny ears.

“R-Rabbitmen?” Gil watched in blank amazement as the rabbitmen leaped from branch to branch. One of the rabbitmen turned back and grinned at Gil.

“This is thanks for protecting our comrades. Keep struggling and try your best to stay alive.” With that, the last of the rabbitmen vanished into the ever-present fog. Though Gil prided himself on his perceptions skills, he couldn’t sense the rabbitmen at all.

“Captain! Are you alright!? What happened!?” Gil let out a raspy chuckle as his subordinate rushed over to him.

Panicking, Gil’s subordinate started checking him over before Gil had a chance to tell him he was fine.

Though Gil’s mind was still on the blue-haired rabbitman who’d saved him to pay attention to his men. After the incident with the cursed child, he had heard a report that had been so outlandish he hadn’t believed it.

“Leggin-dono... I’m sorry I ever doubted you. If I make it out of this alive, I’ll make sure to give you an apology.” For some reason, he didn’t see any other monsters coming to attack him.

Those rabbitmen must have handled it somehow. Gil thought to himself as he staggered to his feet.

“Captain?”

“Ngh. Don’t worry, I’m fine. Thanks to some unexpected assistance, my head’s still attached to my shoulders. But there’s no telling when more monsters’ll show up. Let’s make a break for

Verbergen while we have the chance.”

“Y-Yes sir!”

Gil watched his subordinate dash off to relay his orders.

They were still stuck in a difficult position. Though they’d been saved by the rabbitmen, it would still be a struggle to make it to Verbergen’s defensive line.

“Goddammit. I haven’t felt so powerless since the time I faced off against that boy.” Gil spat angrily.

An oppressive atmosphere hung over the elders’ meeting hall in the center of Verbergen. Ulfric looked grimmer than he ever had in his life, and he’d lived longer than most.

The crisis this time was that grave. The very existence of Verbergen was threatened. All of the elders sat in a circle, exchanging uneasy glances.

Zel, the tigerman elder slammed his fist down onto the ground and roared, “Fuck, what the hell is going on!? How come those strange monsters aren’t affected by the forest’s fog!?”

“We still don’t have enough information to answer that question. Our priority shouldn’t be on figuring out why this situation occurred, but on how to deal with it.” The youngest of the elders, the foxman Lua, narrowed his slit-like eyes as he spoke.

“Calm down, Zel. Lua’s got the right of it.”

“But the monsters these demons have brought are far stronger than any we’ve faced. There’s no telling how long our army will hold against them.” Guze the dwarf said cautiously. Mao, the birdman elder, shook his head in despair.

“We know that! Ulfric, you’re the oldest among us, do you have any ideas!?” Grasping at straws, Zel turned to Ulfric.

Ulfric slowly opened his eyes and muttered, “Perhaps they are led by another who has met the qualifications.” Everyone present shivered. They thought back to the white-haired boy with an eyepatch who’d so easily dispatched the strongest of their number.

“Impossible. We’d never seen anyone who’d fulfilled the requirements and now you’re saying *two* of them have shown up at almost the same time!?”

“Is that really so surprising? We already know one exists, who’s to say there can’t be more? This time, however, it seems it’s a demon who’s acquired the power of the labyrinths. And unlike Hajime Nagumo, I doubt they’ll be willing to sheathe their weapons if we tell them we have no quarrel with their kind...” After a few moments of deliberation, Ulfric made his decision.

“We may have to consider drastic options, such as abandoning Verbergen.”

“What!?”

Zel opened his mouth to object, but then shut it again. The other elders were all speechless as well.

“We can rebuild a nation, but we can’t bring back a life. If we abandon Verbergen we can always rebuild in the depths of the forest, or in the mountains to the north, or in the uninhabited areas of the southern continent. If it comes down to it, we could even cross the western ocean and seek shelter with our comrades across the sea. I know none of these options are appealing, but they’re preferable to fighting to the death.”

“But we can’t just abandon Verbergen! It’s our home, our sacred birthplace!”

“What meaning is there in protecting if we all die in the process? Even without a nation, so long as we have our lives we’ll manage somehow.”

The elders didn’t voice any further complaints. Still, it was not a decision they could agree to lightly. Silence filled the hall as they weighed their options. Their musings were interrupted by a messenger bearing dire news.

The young wolfman courier burst through the hall’s double doors and said in a tearful voice, “Commander Gouto has been slain!”

“!?”

Gouto, the leader of the wolfmen tribe, had been the supreme commander of Verbergen’s forces. The elders and the common people alike had trusted him, and he’d been the symbol of Verbergen’s armed forces. Losing him would have an incalculable effect on morale. The elders could no longer afford to take their time deliberating.

“The Vice-Commander has taken up command, but our forces are being overwhelmed. We’ve already been pushed back to the final defensive line. The Vice-Commander also bade me to pass on a message. He said they’ll fight to the death, and that the elders should use this time to flee the city. That concludes my report.”

“So we’re out of time...” Ulfric muttered sadly. He thought of his granddaughter, Altina, and began mentally drafting an evacuation plan. They wouldn’t be able to save everyone, so they would have to choose a few beastmen from each race to serve as the seeds of the future.

Before he could tell the others of his plan, another messenger burst into the room. This time it was a foxman, and he looked completely out of breath.

“Chief Lua, Elders. I have an urgent report. The enemy appears to be searching for the ‘true labyrinth.’”

“Are you certain?”

Lua asked, eyes opening wide.

“Yes, sir. They’ve been torturing beastmen they capture and asking them that question. No one understands what that means though... so they haven’t been able to answer...” The messenger himself wasn’t sure what this “true labyrinth” referred to either. But he knew it was related to the uproar that had occurred a while back when a human had first visited Verbergen. He stared questioningly at the elders.

Lua turned to Ulfric for guidance.

“We have no other choice. If telling them is what it takes to get them to retreat, it’s a small price to pay. I shall go personally. Hopefully that will be enough to convince them.”

He urged Zel and the other elders to prepare to evacuate in case negotiations broke down and hurried out of the room.

“Ulfric-sama, it’s too dangerous! Let us go in your stead!” Many of the aides and secretaries, including those from other beastmen races, implored Ulfric to reconsider as he made his way out of the building. “There’s no time to argue about this. My decision is final,” he told them all. But he did compromise and agree to take his bow with him. Once that had been settled, he dashed out of the building with a speed that belied his age.

The final defensive line was at the outer gates of the city. Traps and defensive bulwarks had been set up all around it. There were bunches of tree trunks that could be set loose with the snap of a rope, and archery platforms for defenders to rain arrows down from built into the upper branches of the larger trees.

Ulfric bounded up the trees far faster than his weight or age should have allowed. Once he’d reached the uppermost platform, he squinted his eyes and surveyed the battle below.

“They’re fighting admirably.” Indeed, Verbergen’s soldiers were holding out well. Bruised and battered though they were, they continued fighting valiantly against monsters they’d never seen before.

But still, it was clear they’d be overrun before long.

With his superior eyesight, Ulfric was able to spot the enemy commander far to the rear of the demon ranks.

He sucked in a deep breath and bellowed in a booming voice, “Hear me, demons! My name is Ulfric Heipyst! I am one of the elders of Verbergen! You seek the true labyrinth, do you not!” Ulfric’s voice carried across the tumultuous battlefield, and all of Verbergen’s soldiers stopped and turned to see what was happening.

A second later, the monsters stopped as well.

Davros, the demon captain, strode forward in the lull that followed.

“Well, well. So you’re this rabble’s leader. You know where the

entrance to the true labyrinth is?"

"I do indeed. It is a secret known only to the elders of Verbergen. If you wish, I can tell you. But in return, I want you to cease hostilities immediately. We have no intention of interfering with your attempts to clear the labyrinth."

"Hmph, so you're looking to negotiate? Information in exchange for sparing your lives?"

Davros stroked his chin thoughtfully.

Verbergen's soldiers gulped in anticipation.

However, Davros' reply was one no one was expecting.

"Do you know why it is we demons are waiting at the rear?"

"What are you talking about?"

"It's to preserve our strength. We don't want to be too exhausted before challenging the true labyrinth. Besides, wasting our abilities on the likes of you inferior beastmen is more than you deserve."

The beastmen bristled at that.

Unconcerned, Davros kept his gaze locked on Ulfric.

When Ulfric saw the madness in Davros' eyes, he shivered. At the same time, he understood. This wasn't like his meeting with Hajime Nagumo. These monsters had never planned on negotiating from the start.

"Let me explain something to you, since you don't seem to understand. Negotiations can only occur when both sides are on equal footing. Do you understand what equal means!? No grubby beastmen will ever be equal to us, the chosen race! All you filthy animals deserve is death!"

Davros raised an arm and began chanting with practiced speed.

Ulfric reacted with superhuman speed and fired an arrow at him. His aim was perfect, and the arrow went straight for Davros' heart. Considering the distance, it was an almost unbelievable shot.

Unfortunately, his arrow was knocked down by a wall of wind. One of the demons had seen the attack coming and cast the spell ahead of time.

"Ware, men!" Ulfric called out a hasty warning.

"Lava Burst." A second later, Davros' spell went off.

Clods of earth rose up from the ground and coalesced into boulders. The boulders were then engulfed in superheated flames and burst apart into chunks of lava that rained down over the battlefield. Lava Burst was an advanced-level composite spell that combined earth and fire magic. Though it fell under advanced level, its force was as great as some ultimate class spells.

Lumps of burning lava pelted Verbergen's gates.

There was a thunderous roar, followed by a massive shockwave that knocked Verbergen's soldiers flat.

The massive, thirty meter gate was blown off its hinges, taking the nearby trees with it. The parts of the wall surrounding the gate were charred black, and just barely held their shape.

The demons had wiped out Verbergen's last line of defense in a single attack.

"Such power..." Ulfric trembled as he looked at the remnants of the gate.

The soldiers who'd been standing beside it were all on the ground, surrounding by burning embers of lava. He couldn't tell if they were dead or just barely breathing, but none of them moved.

"See the difference between us?" Davros voice was a curious mixture of contemptuous hatred and madness.

"You're nothing more than rejects who were abandoned by our glorious god. The fact that beasts like you tried to form a country is an affront. We are the chosen people, and it is we demons who will usher in a new era of prosperity and splendor. It baffles me that you lesser creatures can't even understand such a simple concept." Davros glared with bloodshot eyes as the beastmen started crawling back to their feet.

"I am truly grateful that crushing your puny nation is part of my mission. Consider this an honor, you brutes. We won't turn you scum into slaves... We'll hunt down every last one of you instead." Two creatures leaped out of the shadows and headed straight for Ulfric.

Ulfric doubted they'd kill him before at least torturing the location of the true labyrinth out of him. Which meant they were hoping to capture him now so that he wouldn't accidentally be killed in the battle that would follow.

"Tch." He pulled three arrows out of his quiver, and fell backwards off the archery platform. His instinct, honed from years of experience, had led him to make the right decision.

No matter how fast an adversary was, once you started falling they had no choice but to change course and attack you from above. And in order to change direction, they first had to decelerate.

Ulfric let his two arrows fly, striking down the pair of bee monsters that had come after him. Meanwhile, his third arrow trailed an arc threw the sky and fell straight toward Davros.

Ulfric then twisted in midair, and fired another volley of arrows through the newly opened hole in Verbergen's wall. These shots seemingly weaved through the press of beastmen and monsters. They, too, headed straight for Davros.

Ulfric's marksmanship was legendary.

Even Davros couldn't help but be amazed. But he still leaped to the side quickly enough to avoid the deadly barrage.

"Damn you!" Davros hated that a measly beastman had forced

him to dodge.

He unleashed a barrage of fireballs, casting practically without chanting. Though fireball was a beginner-level spell, it still packed quite a punch. The earth shook as the storm of fire crashed into the ground around Ulfric.

“Gaaah!?” He cried out in pain as the shockwave sent him flying backwards.

Seeing their elder in trouble, the beastmen rallied once more and charged. However, the demons joined their monster servants in the counterattack, and the beastmen’s battle cries soon turned to gurgled screams of pain and terror.

Everyone in the city knew that the gates had fallen. Messengers had already delivered reports of the demons’ response to the elders, who were now organizing an evacuation. They had all of the civilians split up and flee in different directions, but there was no telling if they’d be able to escape safely still.

It came down to how much time the remaining soldiers could buy. The elders despaired. There didn’t seem to be even a glimmer of hope left.

Verbergen would perish today. The enemy this time was too strong.

“No, wait... we’ve still got a chance.” A bearman panted as he took a beetle’s charge head-on. The stunt cost him a few ribs, but it put the monster in range of his halberd, which he swung down mercilessly.

His name was Regin. He was a powerful warrior who was next in line to be the bearman chief. He was also the soldier who’d ignored the elders’ decision and gone after the Haulia clan after Hajime had crippled Jin. He had of course been utterly crushed, and returned home in disgrace.

As penance for defying Verbergen’s orders, he’d been demoted down to a lowly foot soldier and lost any chance at becoming the next elder.

“If... If they come here to help we still have a chance. I have to find them.” A monster resembling a butterfly fluttered in front of him. It unleashed a beam of heat from its eyes which punched through Regin’s flank. Right after, another beetle charged at him.

“Gaaah!?” Regin screamed out in pain as he was sent flying past the fogless barrier created by the verdren crystals.

“Sorry, guys! Just hold out a little longer!”

Though he was bleeding from head to toe, Regin still got back to his feet. He squeezed out every last ounce of his strength and ran off into the distance.

When he arrived at the Haulia village, he found it completely

fortified, with armed guards ready at the gates.

As he burst through the fog, he was greeted by a squadron of rabbitmen glaring at him with the predatory eyes of monsters. The sight terrified him so much he let out an involuntary scream.

“Never thought I’d see our bearman friend here.” Cam stepped forward. His glare was so feral that Regin averted his gaze. But then he gathered his courage and took a step forward toward the Haulia chief. Regin threw himself at Cam’s feet and pressed his forehead into the ground.

“I understand full well that I have no right to ask you for anything! But please, lend us your help! I’ll even give you my life if that’s what it takes!” He kept his plea short as he knew how shameful it was to beg like this.

The strongest active member of the strongest beastmen race was bowing his head to a rabbitman, the race everyone ridiculed as the weakest.

Had any other rabbitman seen this, they would have doubted their eyes and pinched their fluffy ears to make sure they weren’t dreaming.

Cam’s response was unexpectedly cold.

“You’re an eyesore. Shut your mouth,” he said resolutely.

“Wha—”

Regin ground his teeth. *Why!?* The beastmen’s sacred home, the sea of trees was being invaded. Sure Verbergen and the Haulia had had their disagreements, but Regin was sure they would have helped in the face of such a crisis.

Shocked, Regin opened his mouth to argue.

Before he could say anything though, Cam overrode him.

“You’ve all heard the reports, right men? Their target is the true labyrinth. The labyrinth we’ve been charged to protect until our boss returns one day.”

“.....”

Goosebumps rose on Regin’s arms. Though they were silent, the Haulia clan was exerting some unseen pressure.

“Those bastards are trying to lay their grubby paws on boss’ prize.” There were a number of loud screeches, and all of the monsters in the vicinity fled as fast they could, the undergrowth rustling as they ran past. None of them wanted to be anywhere near the Haulia right now.

Even Regin felt like running. But he couldn’t move.

“If... If they do anything to the Grand Tree that makes it impossible for boss to reach the true labyrinth...” Cam’s rabbit ears stood on end as he ground his teeth ominously.

“Listen up, men. We are all comrades-in-arms, all family. Can we really sit back and watch as our boss’ dreams... are crushed before our

very eyes!?”

“Sir, no sir!”

The Haulia yelled at the top of their lungs. The volume of their voices pushed back the fog a few centimeters.

“Would we be able to face him if we let these bastards do as they please!?”

“Sir, no sir!”

“Would we have any right to call him our boss!?”

“Sir, no sir!”

“That’s right. If we fail here, we’re trash. Trash that isn’t even worthy of licking boss’ boots! Are we trash, gentlemen!?”

“Sir, no, sir!”

“Now that’s what I wanna hear! We are Haulia! Boss’ personal army! The strongest army in the world! And we’re going to prove it by teaching those demons a lesson they won’t forget! Let’s remind them who truly owns these woods!”

“Aye, aye, sir!”

Silence filled the forest once more. The Haulia began to calm down.

No wait. They’re still pumped up... They’re just preparing to kill...

Though they were standing right in front of him, Regin was having a hard time keeping his eyes on them. It was as if they were melting into the background.

Regin realized that this was what the Haulia were like when they were truly serious. All that noise from before had just been for show.

Now they’d gone utterly silent, nearly disappearing from view, with bloodlust oozing from their pores.

This was who the Haulia were. This was the true strength of the rabbitmen everyone had once called the weakest in Haltina.

The rabbitmen smiled, unable to hide their mounting glee.

Their feral grins resembled the crescent moon.

One after another, the Haulia faded from sight. Where were they headed? The only place soldiers the world over ever headed. The battlefield.

Regin was later noted to have said, “The Haulia terrified me back then. Even though they weren’t yelling and screaming like before, their quiet smiles were... ghastly. Ever since that day, I haven’t been able to sleep. Whenever I close my eyes I get nightmares of grinning rabbits coming for... Haaah... Haaah... Sorry. Just thinking about it makes it hard to breathe. I need my meds...”

The first to notice something strange was Vice-Commander Celeka.

“Hm? Wait, why are they coming back?” Celeka tilted his head as he watched a bee-shaped monster—the demons called them Squiers—return to his position.

Because of their speed, the monsters made for good messenger birds. In fact, Celeka had sent this one off with a message for his flanks just a few moments ago. However, he could tell the Squier still had the orders he’d written tied to its leg.

Which mean that it had somehow lost track of where his flanking unit was.

He untied the message just in case, but as he expected it was the same one he’d written.

“Don’t tell me the fog’s started affecting them suddenly.” Celeka shook his head. “Nah, there’s no way,” he said, discarding the possibility.

Up ahead, Ulfric and the beastmen’s best elites were holding their own against Davros’ charge.

Honestly, Celeka wanted to be a part of the beastmen extermination battle, but he knew someone had to stay behind to keep an eye on the overall situation and maintain control of the monsters.

Besides, the demons had already fought their way into Verbergen, and were slaughtering soldiers and civilians alike. The beastmen might still be holding out, but it was only a matter of time before they were routed.

Shrugging his shoulders, Celeka retied the message and was about to order the Squier back out when another one flew in.

“What, you too?” This one, too, still had his message attached to its leg. In order to prevent any beastmen from escaping the purge, he’d split his unit into three and had them surround Verbergen. And now, he’d now lost contact with two of those three units.

“Perhaps I should send in reinforcements, just in case...” Celeka doubted his men were so hard-pressed they hadn’t had time to reply.

It was more likely they were just so caught up in the slaughter that they hadn’t noticed he’d sent the Squiers.

If only I could communicate telepathically with the monsters. Celeka mused to himself. With a wry smile, he blew the whistle around his neck. Its noise was too high-pitched for demon ears to perceive, but all of the monsters he kept in reserve would gather at the sound.

He’d deployed his reserve forces at various points around the city, and it shouldn’t have taken them long to assemble.

“.....” The monsters did show up, but only a third as many as he’d deployed.

Celeka blew his whistle once more. But no more appeared.

A wave of dread washed over him.

“What’s happening? Why aren’t the monsters coming back!? Did

we lose control of them? Impossible, Freid-sama made them specifically for us. There's no way they'd stop listening to commands." Celeka ordered one of his men to go scope out the situation.

"Fidra, the monsters aren't responding to my commands! I want you to—" He stopped mid-sentence.

"Fidra? Hey, where are you!? Fidra!" Fidra was meant to have been engaging the beastmen holding the remnants of Verbergen's gate. But he wasn't there. Upon looking around, Celeka realized how drastically the situation had changed in the past few minutes.

"The barrier's... shrunk?" Normally, the perimeter of verdren crystals extended a good distance out of Verbergen. Right now, though, its range had shrunk considerably.

He strained his eyes, and spotted a shadow at the edge of the fog.

"Fidra! Is that you!? Answer me!" There was no reply.

"Get out there and support Fidra!" Celeka ordered his monsters.

He couldn't imagine anything had happened to his best soldier. After all, their side was winning. Once they wiped out the last remaining soldiers and Davros handled the elders and commanders, all that'd be left was slaughtering the remaining beastmen. Ten of his monsters charged into the fog, toward the shadow Celeka had spotted.

That should have solved everything. Celeka tried to ignore the cold sweat pouring down his forehead.

But just then, he felt something coming at him from behind.

"Tch— Wind Blades!" His instantaneous reaction and almost nonexistent chant was a mark of how skilled he was.

However, his wind blades passed harmlessly through the fog, touching nothing.

"What the? What's going..." Celeka was finally starting to panic. Before he could make another move, something fell in front of his feet with a heavy thud. Curious, he looked down.

What he saw unnerved him.

"Ah!" He leaped back with a yell. Sitting at his feet was Fidra's head.

"Captain, we're under attack by an unknown number of hostiles!" Davros stopped what he was doing and turned to face his flustered messenger.

He had been just about to spear Ulfric with a Crimson Javelin and put an end to the fight. Ulfric, Zel, the other elders, and all of the beastmen captains lay defeated on the ground.

As Davros still needed to get the location of the true labyrinth out of them he'd avoided hitting any of their vitals, but they were still on death's doorstep.

"Under attack? What do you mean?" He frowned in confusion.

“There’s something in the fog! Fidra’s already been slain! Moreover we’ve lost contact with two of our units! The monsters I sent to reinforce them have all been wiped out!”

“What!? Call back all of the monsters we sent into the capital! Who leads the last unit!?”

“Balen, sir!”

“Recall him this instant!”

Davros hadn’t been expecting this. Eyes bloodshot, he turned to glare at Ulfric. He finished his incantation, and a flaming javelin appeared in his hand. He pointed it at Ulfric and said, “What’s the meaning of this? You sure are crafty, bringing out your trump card at the very last moment.” Davros had lost a number of his men, and a great deal of monsters his beloved commander had entrusted to him.

His voice trembled from barely suppressed rage.

In truth, however, even Ulfric didn’t know what was going on. If he really had a trump card up his sleeve, he would have used it before the gate had been destroyed. He was just as confused as Davros.

He opened his mouth to say as much, but stopped when he caught sight of who was standing atop the remnants of Verbergen’s walls.

Eyes wide, he was too stunned to answer Davros’ question. Seeing his surprise, Davros turned and followed his gaze.

Standing atop the shattered gate was a rabbitman.

But there was something clearly strange about him.

The demons had studied up on the traits of each of the beastman races before their invasion. So they knew that rabbitmen were a cowardly race who eschewed battle. And in fact, all of the rabbitmen they’d met until now had fled at the first sight of conflict.

However, the rabbitman in front of Davros was calmly standing in the middle of a battlefield. His ears were covered in blood, and he was glaring at Davros with unbridled hatred. In one hand he held a short sword. In the other, a demon’s head.

“You bastard.” That demon was the leader of one of the squads they’d lost contact with.

“Cam... Haulia...” Ulfric muttered in awe. The leader of the clan they’d banished had returned.

The other elders and soldiers were just as stunned. Everyone was staring at Cam in blank amazement.

Cam casually tossed aside the demon head, as if it was nothing more than trash.

He then looked down at Davros and sneered.

“Heh.” It was obvious to everyone present that he had nothing but contempt for Davros.

Without another word, Cam vanished into the mist.

The fog parted to show a path heading in the direction he’d

disappeared. He must have left verdren crystals in his wake.

It was obviously a challenge.

“Vice-Captain Celeka. Gather all of our forces. It’s time to hunt some rabbits.” Davros’ voice was completely flat, and his face devoid of emotion.

When Davros’ anger reached past a certain point, he no longer expressed it on his face.

“At once, sir!” Celeka, on the other hand, was trembling with rage.

Davros strode down the path Cam had left for him, without so much as a single glance at any of the elders. It appeared he thought Verbergen’s forces were too exhausted to pose a threat even if he left them alone. He’d let Cam’s taunts get to him and was no longer thinking clearly. With the demons gone from Verbergen, Ulfric breathed a sigh of relief.

“I never imagined he would be the one to save us...” He muttered.

The other elders nodded absentmindedly.

Davros marched through the fog, his army of monsters at his back.

He’d linked up with his remaining unit along the way, but as he’d feared, the two they’d lost contact with had been completely annihilated.

Including Davros and Celeka, only six demons remained. They’d lost over fifty percent of their fighting force.

What was even more humiliating though, was that they hadn’t even noticed this new enemy until most of them were dead.

Those blasted rabbitmen had chipped away at their forces while they were busy pillaging Verbergen. The fact that the rabbitmen had planned it that way, and that the demons had actually fallen for it aggravated the demons to no end. Davros was seething.

He hadn’t expected rabbitmen, the race known to be the most sympathetic of all beastmen, to use their own nation as bait.

It was a miscalculation he couldn’t have foreseen.

After all, he had no way of knowing that the Haulia had been exiled from Verbergen, and thought nothing of the lives of other beastmen, unless they were rabbitmen.

“I have never suffered such a humiliating defeat in my life. Unless we annihilate every last one of them we’ll be returning home in disgrace.”

“You said it, captain. I know there’s no honor in war, but sacrificing your own brethren is still a despicable ploy! We won’t let these cowardly vermin live!”

The other four demons nodded in agreement to Celeka’s words.

Just then, a shadow flitted past at the edge of their vision.

A few of Celeka's Squiers shot forward, faster than lightning. He'd ordered them beforehand to target anything that moved.

A second later, they were all sliced neatly in two.

"What!?"

"Impossible, where did that attack come from!?"

Davros opened his eyes wide in surprise. Celeka cast his gaze about in a panic. Another shadow dashed past. As Celeka hadn't rescinded his order, another unit of Squiers shot forward. These, too, were cut in half before reaching their target.

"It's not an attack, vice-captain! Look closely! They've stretched wires between the trees! It's a trap! Don't send any more Squiers out!"

Celeka switched tactics and sent out his armored beetles, the Drygers, instead.

"Hmph, nothing more than petty tricks. I'll run you all down!" The Drygers toppled the trees holding up the wires, and... fell to the ground.

"What now!?" Toppling the trees had caused the wires to stretch, activating the second part of the rabbitmen's trap. The wires had pulled crossbow triggers which had rained arrows down on the Drygers' propulsion organs.

Their remaining momentum carried the Drygers straight into the pitfalls the Haulia had prepared beforehand. The heated coals at the bottom of the pit ignited the Drygers, incinerating their flammable bodies.

With that, another chunk of Davros' monsters were defeated.

"Everyone, get in a circle formation! Start casting wide-area magic in all directions! Have the Cyuverias fire blind too!" The butterflies that fired heat rays, Cyuverias, started launching their attacks in all directions. Meanwhile, Davros and the others began chanting wide-area magic spells. Demons were already more skilled in magic than humans, and six of them in tandem were strong enough to blow apart everything around them.

However, they'd made a mistake in ordering their Cyuverias to buy time by firing into the mist at random.

As their rays melted the nearby trees, a there were a number of loud snapping noises in quick succession.

It was followed by a loud whoosh, and a giant tree pendulum came swinging down at the demons.

It punched through a number of monsters and slammed squarely into one demon, sending him flying.

"Gah!?" He cried out in pain as he vanished into the fog. A few seconds later, he screamed again before going silent.

"Kramer! Gah!?" One of Kramer's close friends interrupted his chanting and called out to him. A second later, he followed his buddy

into the afterlife as an arrow penetrated the back of his skull. He slipped off the Dryger he was riding, dead before he even hit the ground.

In the span of a few seconds, the demons had lost another third of their remaining number.

However, these four made sure to finish chanting their spells to completion. Together, they summoned a howling storm that blew away everything in the vicinity.

“Infinite Storm Edge!” Infinite Storm Edge was the strongest wind spell in existence. A massive storm whipped up around the demon. Countless blades of winds rode the storm, making mincemeat of everything inside it.

All of the nearby trees were cut into pieces, and even the surrounding fog was blown away. Davros’ thinking in that they needed something to alter the flow of the battle had indeed been correct. But he should have been more wary of the traps the Haulia had set up beforehand.

They were fighting in the heart of Haulia territory. Cam and the others had already factored in the likelihood that the demons would lose their temper at being whittled down by unseen traps and try to blow everything away. And so they had prepared a safe path of retreat.

Namely, they’d dug trenches. They’d fortified the walls of their trenches with bedrock that they’d dug up, and covered the tops with shock-resistant material. The only reason they’d been able to box themselves in like that was because their Azantium-coated short swords were capable of cutting through anything.

Had they opted for a more suitable spell, like Lava Burst, the demons may have been able to inflict some damage on the Haulia, but they’d let their anger get the better of them.

“Hmph, this should make it easier to spot—”

“Captain!”

Davros turned to Celeka, who had an arrow sprouting from his shoulder. A second later, a hail of arrows rained down on the demons.

“Vice-captain! Shit, they must have burrowed underground!” Bolts came at them from all angles, occasionally accompanied by stones and sacks filled to the brim with some unknown powder. Davros and the remaining demons were forced to put up barriers around them.

Because they weren’t given any time to think, they didn’t realize the powder wasn’t poison, but simple ground flour.

The Haulia were only doing this to buy time until the mist returned.

Finally the arrows and stones came to a halt. Enough powder was in the air that it would function as mist for a little while. Annoyed, the

demons once more started chanting wind magic.

“Send all the monsters out! Eliminate those pests!” Even though the fog was beginning to return, the monsters were capable of navigating within it.

However, the monsters just looked about in confusion, and made no move to charge.

“Huh? How come they’re not chasing the rabbitmen?” It was then that Celeka realized. Originally, he had ordered the monsters to attack any rabbitman they located.

Unlike the demons, they didn’t need to confirm the rabbitmen’s presence by sight, they had perception skills for that.

And yet, they’d only attacked the two times shadows had flitted close enough for even the demons to see. In other words, the rabbitmen had some way of hiding their presence entirely.

“Crap. Here they come, get ready, men!” Davros called out a warning as he spotted a number of figures crawling across the ground.

“Sorry, but you’re too late.” Davros couldn’t tell where that voice came from.

But a second later, all of his monsters started getting assassinated. Davros and the other three demons were safe because of his barrier, but the monsters hadn’t been within it.

The Haulia weaved between monsters with unparalleled grace, striking at each monster’s vitals as they passed it.

Their hit and run was executed so perfectly even Davros had to admire their skill.

Before the demons could respond, the rabbitmen melted away into the mist again. Most of the few remaining monsters chased after them, as per their orders. Which of course meant they split up in all directions.

“Captain! We can’t fight them in their territory! Let’s retreat to Verbergen for now! I know it’s shameful, but if not even our monsters can keep track of their whereabouts, we won’t stand a chance! We’re at a disadvantage here!”

“I can’t believe we’ve been pushed this far by a bunch of stinking beastmen!” Davros clenched his fist so hard he started bleeding, but he knew Celeka was right. They needed to retreat and regroup.

“Everyone, we’re forcing our way out of this death trap!” Davros mounted one of the last Drygers and led their retreat.

Unfortunately, retreating meant they once again had to navigate their way through a maze of trees.

“Aaaaaaaaah!?”

“Heather!”

The demon known as Heather suddenly had a rope slung about her neck and was wrenched upwards.

A deluge of blood spilled from above. No one could tell what exactly had happened, as her head was draped in fog.

Davros' Cyuverias started firing randomly into the fog, but were shot down by a barrage of accurately aimed arrows. Whatever land-based monsters were left ended up falling into more pitfalls, or were trapped by puddles of viscous sap. Those that got trapped were left behind, and summarily executed by the Haulia.

Occasionally, another shadow would flit past the demons, taunting them.

"Don't get ahead of yourself, you scuuum!" Spurred on by panic and rage, one of the demons leaped off the path and charged at the shadow. He fired off a barrage of spells, some of which hit the shadow and sent it flying.

"Haha, take that you little—"

"Balén, don't break formation!"

Davros' warning came too late.

The force of Balén's spells temporarily cleared away the mist, only to show that he'd hit a wooden dummy, and not actually a person.

He barely had time to go "Huh?" before a rabbitman girl leaped down and gently cut his head from his shoulders.

Davros and Celeka began chanting, aiming to hit the bunny girl the moment she landed. But before they could finish, their Drygers came to a sudden halt throwing their riders off and cutting off their incantation.

"Goddammit, how many traps did you put down!?" The Drygers had been caught in a pair of makeshift bear traps. The Haulia had used a special ore, one that shattered into jagged pieces like obsidian, to line the trap's jaws.

"C-Captain..." Davros turned around to see Celeka crawling on the ground, his back riddled with spikes. When he'd been thrown off his Dryger, he'd landed in a field of caltrops. It was only dumb luck that had saved Davros from a similar fate. Unfortunately for him, his luck had run out.

Looking around, he saw the last of his monsters succumbing to various traps. His giant cricket-shaped monsters, Linvals, all died as they stepped on paper bags that held a poisonous gas. His Drygers were wiped out by punji traps that had been cleverly camouflaged. His flying leaf-insect-like creatures, Ozmuses, were caught in nets made from vines that resembled barbed wire and were shredded to bits. His Squiers were lured in by the glimpses of rabbitmen the Haulia allowed them to see and sliced in half by more wire traps. Even the monsters who'd left earlier to chase the retreating Haulia found themselves falling prey to traps.

And it wasn't just traps anymore. All of these booby traps had just

been one way to even out the difference in numbers and strength between the Haulia and their foe.

Now that they could attack with relative safety, Par started sniping Davros' Cyuverias as well. He made sure to mask his presence to the utmost, and change locations after every shot to keep enemies off his trail. His crossbow was the best-suited weapon to the task as well.

Any monster that wasn't instantly killed by a trap was finished off by a Haulia's short sword while it was still immobilized.

"Are all the vermin living in this forest as crafty as you fiends!?" Davros roared in frustration.

Had any of Verbergen's soldiers heard his outburst they would have vehemently denied his accusation. The Haulia were the only clan with such a huge fondness for booby traps. No other race or clan used them. And no other clan or race wanted to be associated with them.

None of the demons could have guessed that the monster of the abyss' influence reached even here. But it was his Spartan boot camp that had turned these rabbitmen into shrewd killers. First he'd shattered Freid's plans at the capital, now his trained soldiers were ruining Davros' ambitions in the Haltina Woods.

"If I could just make it back to Verbergen, I could take one of those elders hostage and..."

"That won't do you any good."

A voice boomed out in response to Davros' mutterings. Because of the rabbitmen's confusing movements, and their excellent stealth skills, Davros wasn't able to pinpoint the source of the voice.

"It won't?"

"Indeed. If you want to kill the elders, go ahead. It's no skin off our back."

"Aren't they your leaders?"

"There is only one man worthy of being called our leader. But as you are about to die, you have no need to know who he is."

"You think a pack of stinking beastmen can kill me? I'll prove to you my life won't come cheap, you bastards!"

"Shouldn't you be more worried about that young man next to you?"

"What!?"

Come to think of it, Celeka's been awfully quiet. Sure, he'd been stabbed by a field of caltrops, but his injuries shouldn't have been fatal.

"Gah C-Captain... R-Run... away..."

"Vice-Captain Celeka!? What—wait your face, those spines were poisoned!"

The Haulia were masters of murder. If they'd invited their enemy

into a killing field, it was only natural that they'd make all of their traps fatal. One of the rabbitmen walked out of the mist.

"I don't believe it. You really are rabbitmen. Weren't you supposed to be the weakest race?"

"We are. It's all just a matter of perspective, you see. What we lacked was resolve. True, until now all we ever did was run away and hide whenever a fight was about to break out. In that respect, we certainly are the weakest. But looking at that from another angle, it means we were able to survive in this sea of trees without ever fighting. In other words, that's how much potential we had." Cam's lips curled up into a fearless grin. "No one else is as suited to fighting within these woods as we are. Which means so long as we possess the will to fight, us rabbitmen are the strongest race in Haltina."

"You've got some nerve, calling yourselves the strongest race," Davros sneered.

Cam shook his head and shrugged his shoulders.

"The only one who truly deserves to be called the strongest everywhere is our boss, but... well, there's no point in discussing this with you. By the way, I hope you know all of your monsters have already been wiped out. No one's coming to help you. Your precious subordinate'll be dead soon, so he's no use to you either. So—what do you think of settling things with a duel? You versus me."

Davros' eyes shot open in shock. *That cocky fool thinks he's already won.* He thought to himself as he saw Cam's fearless smile. *If I take him hostage, will those other rabbitmen stand down? I've already failed in my mission and shamed my homeland, but I need to get this information back to the others somehow.* Davros got to his feet and dropped into a combat stance. He'd made his decision.

"Looks like you're not all spineless wimps. If a duel's what you want, a duel's what you'll get! I don't back down from a challenge!"

"Hmm, very well. Then let us begin."

Cam drew his short sword and crouched low to the ground. He looked ready to charge at any moment.

I'll stick to low-level spells. Speed's more important than power here. I'll destroy his footing using spells I only need to chant the name of! With his plan of action decided, Davros warily observed his foe. The moment Cam stepped forward, he would cast. The two of them stared each other down, like gunmen in a wild west movie.

Finally, Davros saw Cam tense his legs. *Now!*

"Wind Blast!" A sphere of wind headed straight for Cam's legs.

"Wha—" And missed.

Davros had expected Cam to leap forward, but he'd actually jumped back into the mist. Bloodlust had been dripping off him, and was continuing to drip off him even now, so Davros had been justified

in expecting an attack. Even a veteran such as himself couldn't help but be momentarily taken aback. And naturally, the Haulia's sniper team wasn't going to let that opening slip past them.

"Gaaah!?" A barrage of arrows pierced his legs, sending him to his knees. The Haulia had done to him what he'd been planning on doing to Cam. Once he was immobilized, another one of the Haulia fired a small bag at him with a slingshot.

It was filled ground pepper seeds that grew in a certain corner of Haltina. They made for great seasoning, and also as ingredients for a makeshift tear gas bomb. The bag burst, filling Davros' lungs with burning hot powder.

A mage who couldn't talk, couldn't cast. Coughing profusely, Davros just barely noticed someone coming at him from behind.

"Ah!"

He turned around, dodging in the nick of time. But that attack had been a trap. A blade suddenly sprouted from his chest. Another rabbitman had stabbed him from the back.

"Y-You bastard. You said this would be a duel," Davros spat, his breathing labored.

Cam twisted the blade and tilted his head.

"I simply asked what you *thought* of settling things with a duel."

In other words, he'd implied that he was interested in seeing if Davros wanted to settle things with one, but he had no intention of a duel from the start.

"You, craven cur."

"Can't say I care about being praised by anyone other than Boss."

With that, Cam unsheathed his second short sword and decapitated Davros. As his consciousness began to fade, his final thoughts were, *Your Majesty, Freid-sama, beware the demons that lurk in the sea of trees.*

"In short, that was how we annihilated the demons. Unfortunately, Verbergen still suffered great casualties in the—Hm? What's wrong, Boss? You look like you swallowed a thousand cockroaches. Like your favorite pet grew way faster than you ever expected and now you don't know what to do with it."

"You're not doing this on purpose, right?"

Hajime glared at Par. Par tilted his head in confusion; it seemed he really wasn't doing it intentionally. Lana and the others seemed just as lost. "What's the matter, boss?" their gazes seemed to say.

At the start of Par's tale, most of the people listening had sympathized with the beastmen. But as he'd continued, they'd started feeling more sorry for the demons than anything.

I never thought the day would come that I'd pray for the souls of my

Meanwhile, Kouki and the other students were glaring at Hajime. *Of course your disciples are going to be like this with the way you are! You killed that demon in Orcus without even listening to her final words, and you told Freid that you don't give a damn about your classmates or the citizens!* Though their gazes were reproachful, they didn't dare say any of that aloud.

“Hajime-san, do something! My family’s evolved too far. In the wrong direction, too. This is all because you got them fired up with that speech before you left Haltina!”

“Please don’t lump me together with the likes of them!” Shea wailed. She could say some surprisingly cruel things about her own family.

“At any rate, you guys did good. You understood that you couldn’t win in a pure battle of strength, so you focused on gathering information and utilized your race’s special traits to their utmost. That was the perfect combination of ambushes, traps, sneak attacks, and diversions. You didn’t hesitate to use methods others would call cowardly, and as a result you’re a far cry from the clan that used to run away at the first sign of trouble. You’ve really exceeded my expectations.”

“Boss! I can die a happy woman now!”

“Heh, Minasteria. This the first time I’ve ever seen you get so this emotional. Man, you’re making me cry too.”

“Yeah...”

Next to her, Tio muttered, “They have been trained splendidly...”

She looked enviously over at Hajime, and Kaori took a few steps away from her.

Hajime cleared his throat to get everyone's attention again and asked Par to continue.

"So what happened after that? You gave us all of the background information, but you still haven't explained how that connects to the current situation."

Par instantly stopped crying and stood at attention. The change was so sudden Liliana, Kouki, and the others took an involuntary step backwards.

"Correct. In order to defeat the demons and their monsters, we had to use up almost all of our booby traps and consumable weapons. In order to shore up our defenses, and avoid dealing with the chaos in Verbergen, we retreated back to our village."

With Verbergen's forces depleted, the elders had had a hard time treating the wounded, recalling all of the beastmen that had evacuated the city, and repairing the shattered main gate. It was in the middle of their hectic recovery period, just three days after the demon attack, that they'd been hit again.

"We just couldn't catch a break. This time it was the empire that invaded. Unlike the demons they had no way of navigating through the fog so they just sent a massive army to push their way in by force."

"What do you mean, by force?" Hajime asked dubiously.

Liliana was curious as well, and she leaned in closer.

"Well, Boss. Those bastards decided if they couldn't find their way to Verbergen normally, then they just had to burn the forest until they had a clear path to the city."

"They set the whole forest on fire!?" Liliana exclaimed in surprise.

Par turned to Liliana and nodded.

"Until now, they'd forced slaves to be their guides through the forest so no one was expecting them to switch to such drastic measures."

Forcing slaves to guide soldiers through the forest wasn't something that was done often. The imperial soldiers knew that the beastmen they'd enslaved would turn on them given the opportunity. After all, no one wanted to lead their captors to their countrymen. It was natural the beastmen wouldn't make for the most willing or trustworthy guides.

And no one had been expecting another large-scale attack right after the demon invasion.

"They weren't here to invade though. They only wanted to capture slaves."

"That's all? They went to such lengths just to capture slaves like

always?”

“Correct. Unfortunately, we noticed their assault too late, and by the time we’d arrived at Verbergen there was nothing to be done... Well, with their army in tatters, it’s no surprise they buckled quickly.”

“Something must have happened within the empire...”

Par nodded in affirmation.

“We captured a number of the empire’s rear guard as they left and interrogated them. It appeared the empire had suffered an assault by an army of powerful, never-before-seen monsters as well. They’d suffered serious casualties, and had come to Haltina to ‘replenish their supply of hard labor’ as those scum put it.”

Everyone gasped. Liliana looked particularly shaken. She had been planning on appealing the empire for assistance, but now it turned out they’d been hit just as hard as the kingdom, to the point where they were resorting to massive slave drives to recruit labor.

Now that he’d grasped the overall situation, Hajime sighed.

“I see now... They probably claim it’s to rebuild the country, but it’s obvious what trash like them are really after. If you guys are striking back against them, that means they must have captured rabbitmen too, even though they’re useless when it comes to hard labor.”

“Yeah. It’s disgusting.”

Rabbitmen were usually bought as sex slaves within the empire, so it was obvious what they were really being captured for. Though the Haulia cared nothing for the fate of Verbergen, they couldn’t stand idly by as their weaker comrades had their futures stolen from them.

In order to rescue them, Cam had left for the imperial capital along with his best elites. The rest of his family had stayed behind to watch over Haltina. However, no one had heard anything from him since he’d infiltrated the city. No messengers had come to deliver reports, which had started worrying the other rabbitmen.

Unable to stay put any longer, they’d assembled another unit to sneak into the capital and find out what had happened to their comrades. Par’s Baltfeld squad had been chosen to partake in the operation as well.

“We didn’t want a repeat of whatever might have happened to Cam’s squad, so we focused on gathering information first. We put scouts at every one of the capital’s gates and gathered as much information about the empire’s current forces and the state of the city as we could. It was then that we saw a transport packed with slaves leaving the capital, so we decided to ambush it and free the slaves while also gathering what information we could from the slavers.”

And that was when Hajime, who’d been headed to the empire himself, had run into them. The following slaughter he’d witnessed

firsthand, so he didn't need to ask about it.

"I've gotta say though, those demons sure are keeping themselves busy. The assault on the kingdom was probably their main goal, but... god, they're annoying."

Hajime shook his head wearily. He was getting tired of running into demons everywhere he went. Liliana and Kouki groaned as well. One attack had nearly destroyed them, they couldn't imagine having to deal with a continuous stream of them.

Par's bunny ears perked up at Hajime's words.

"Judging from your tone, it sounds like you've been fighting demons yourself, Boss."

"Yeah, they've been running around everywhere trying to sabotage the kingdom. Unfortunately for them, I always happened to be wherever they showed up, so all their plans fell apart."

To Hajime, the demons were nothing more than pests who kept interfering with his quest. It wasn't like he hated them or anything, but they always seemed to get in the way of whatever he was doing at the time. More often than not, he'd kill them just because they were a hindrance.

And though he hadn't directly interfered with the Haltina Woods affair, it was his influence that had led to their defeat there as well. Par had mentioned Verbergen was in pretty dire straits, but Hajime was willing to bet the demons were in even worse shape.

"Well anyway, I more or less understand what's going on. For now, I take it you guys are going to keep looking for information on Cam's location?"

"Yes, sir. Also, I hate to impose on you boss, but..."

"Yeah, don't worry. I was heading there anyway. I'll drop off all the beastmen in the sea of trees."

"Thank you very much, sir!"

Par and the others bowed to Hajime.

Shea fidgeted with her bunny ears, looking like she wanted to say something. In the end though, she kept her mouth shut.

Hajime noticed the gesture though, and guessed what it was she wanted to say, too. But he stayed silent, figuring it was better to wait for Shea to say it herself.

The rest of their trip passed uneventfully, and Hajime dropped Liliana, her guards, and Par's squad down near the outskirts of the imperial capital. He agreed to deliver Par's message to the Haulia still in the Haltina Woods, and sped off towards the forest.

As they drew close to the sea of trees, Shea gasped. With the help of Farsight, she was able to see just how badly the forest had been burned. It appeared the empire had taken the straightest route they

could toward the center of the woods. The scars they'd left in their wake were still fresh, and there was a single line of burned trees from the edge of the forest to Verbergen.

"This is horrible..."

"I cannot say I approve of such wholesale desecration of nature."

Kaori and Tio covered their mouths in horror. Burned, blackened trunks littered the ground. The Hoelscher Empire had burned a swathe about one hundred meters wide straight through the forest. At the very least, they hadn't let the fire run unchecked through the whole forest, but every living creature within the burn zone had been charred to a crisp.

Shea looked the most devastated out of everyone. Her bunny ears drooped as she looked at the destruction. Her memories of Haltina weren't all pleasant, but it was still her home. Yue gently squeezed Shea's hand.

"Looks like Verbergen's still a little protected. The trees might be gone, but the fog's still here." Hajime pointed to the white fog on his crystal monitor.

Altina, who'd come to the bridge a few minutes ago when Hajime had told everyone they'd reached the sea of trees, replied.

"We may have been exhausted with our battle against the demons, but we still had a somewhat sizable fighting force left. When we sent soldiers to engage the empire, they stopped burning the forest. I think they wanted to avoid burning us all to death by accident. The empire was looking for slaves, not corpses after all."

"Makes sense. But Par said they made it all the way to Verbergen? I have no idea how far away from the city you guys stopped them, but I'm amazed they didn't get lost."

"Signs of our battle with the demons were still littered around the city, so they were able to keep their bearings by following the carnage. In fact, they realized halfway to the city just how badly we'd been weakened."

"You guys just can't catch a break, huh."

So the area around Verbergen hasn't been burned down, at least. Which explained why Hajime couldn't pinpoint Verbergen's location from where he was. He didn't want to frighten any beastmen left in the area either, so he did the sensible thing and landed Fernir on a blackened patch of ground just before the fog started.

He walked down the ramp, the freed beastmen following timidly in his wake.

They were glad to be back home, but the devastation their homeland had suffered weighed heavily on them.

Kouki, Ryutarou, Suzu, and Shizuku all spat curses at the empire. But despite their anger, there was nothing they could do. However,

there was someone else who could. And she was just as angry about what had happened.

“Hey, Hajime-kun. Can I talk to you for a second?”

“Hm? What’s up, Kaori?”

Kaori’s divinely beautiful face was flush with excitement, and she was breathing hard. Behind her, Shizuku muttered “Uh oh, she’s at it again...” Sadly, she said it too softly for Hajime to hear. If he had, he might have been able to stop her.

“I was thinking of using restoration magic on the forest. I have enough mana to do it, and in this body I think I can handle an area this big no problem too!”

“You want to use restoration magic on all the burned trees? I guess in Noint’s body you probably do have enough magical skill and mana to do it, but...”

“Yep. It’ll only take me a minute, so just wait right there.”

“Huh? Wait, you’re going to do it right now? Wait up, you moron!”

But it was too late. Kaori really was a priest through and through. The moment she saw anyone or anything that was injured, she got right to work.

“Tetragrammaton!”

Tetragrammaton was restoration magic that could restore anyone or anything back to its original state.

Ripples of mana spread out from her body. Her normally lavender-colored mana had tinges of silver in it now. Her mana melted into the forest, bathing it in light. It was truly a sight to behold, seeing an entire forest shimmering with divine light.

The earth went from black to green, and the toppled trees righted themselves, their burned trunks springing back into life.

Everyone watched in slack-jawed awe as the forest knit itself back together. Once she was finished, Kaori proudly wiped a bead of sweat off her brow.



“Kaori, you idiot.” Yue kicked Kaori in the shin. Her pointed boots made it hurt quite a bit.

“Owww! What was that for, Yue!?”

“Look around, dumbbo.”

“What do you mean—”

Kaori trailed off as she examined her surroundings, and realized the fog had returned. She could barely see a few meters in any direction.

“.....”

“I figured we could just follow the damage all the way to Verbergen, but... I guess not. Looks like you’ll have to guide us again, Shea.”

“Leave it to me~”

Kaori buried her face in her hands and squatted down in shame. A few beastmen children ran up to her and tried to comfort her. Hajime couldn’t tell if it was because they trusted her now that she’d restored their home, or if they just felt sorry for her.

“Y-You were amazing, Onee-san!”

“Don’t be so sad! We’ll be here so you won’t get lost!”

“Everything’ll be alright, Onee-chan!”

Unfortunately, their attempts at cheering her up just made her more embarrassed.

“Cheer up, Kaori. You did a good thing.”

Shizuku knelt down and patted Kaori’s head.

“Let me guess, you were probably thinking something like ‘Now that I have this new body, I won’t let Yue hog all the glory! Look at me, Hajime-kun, I can be useful too!’ I get how you feel, but next time think before you act.”

“I will...”

Kaori nodded meekly.

Grimacing, Ryutarou turned to Shizuku and said, “Are you a psychic or something? Ever since coming to this world it’s like you’ve been able to read Kaori’s mind or something, Shizuku. You’re starting to freak me out a little.”

“You know, Ryutarou-kun. Sometimes, it feels like I’m being totally left out from their little world...”

Suzu was looking down at the ground, desolate, when she felt a sympathetic hand on her shoulder. Turning around, she saw the last person she’d expect smiling at her and giving her a thumbs-up.

“I understand, Suzu. I too, often feel left out when Yue and Shea start ignoring me. But fear, not. Eventually, your loneliness shall transform into pleas—”

“Tio-san. Please stop corrupting our party members.”

Hajime sighed as he watched the chaos unfold.

“Kaori, come on let’s go. You might have messed up a little, but that was still seriously impressive so cheer up.”

Kaori instantly perked up at those words.

Hajime then turned to Tio and said, “Listen up you hopeless pervert of a dragon. The forest’s fog doesn’t affect you either right? You’re in charge of guiding Amanogawa and the others. In fact, why don’t you just join their party forever?”

“Are you trying to pawn me off, master!? Have you no manners!?”

Hajime ignored Tio and started walking forward. Of course, being ignored only made Tio more excited.

“W-Wait, Nagumo! You can’t seriously be leaving us with *her*!”

It was rare to see Kouki talk ill of anyone that wasn’t Hajime.

“My apologies, Kouki. But I feel nothing even when you insult me. In fact, it rather irritates me. Find someone else to belittle.”

Tio gave Kouki a pitying look, nodded, and walked off into the mist as if nothing had happened.

“Why does it feel like I just got dumped, even though I didn’t confess?”

“You’re better off not thinking about it. Come on, let’s go.”

Ryutarou smiled sympathetically and gave Kouki a pat on the back.

And thus, the group advanced through the fog toward Verbergen. Two months had passed since the last time Hajime and Yue had visited the city. They’d grown a lot stronger since, and they’d acquired plenty more ancient magic as well, including the one they needed for this labyrinth. And yet, they weren’t able to escape the effects of the forest’s disorienting fog.

The two of them shared a knowing smile and nodded to each other. *This place is still super dreary.* Hajime thought.

Having discovered that Hajime and his party held no prejudice against them, and meant them no harm, the beastmen became quite trusting of him. They surrounded Hajime and the others as they guided them through the mist to make sure that no one got separated.

They seemed to have a particular fondness for Kaori. The children especially crowded around her, and blushed every time she smiled at them. A few of the beastmen girls were already clinging to her clothes and arms.

Shea and Altina meanwhile, were leading the group from the head of the column. Altina kept trying to sneak glances back at Hajime, but was met by Yue’s cold glare every time, so she stopped.

After about an hour of walking, Shea’s drooping rabbit ears suddenly perked up. She strained her ears and peered through the fog.

“Hajime-san, there’s an armed group headed our way.”

Surprised, the other beastmen turned to Shea. None of the others, not even any of the other captured rabbitmen had been able to sense anything. It appeared her perception abilities were on another level. A few seconds later, a squad of armed tigermen appeared from the fog, proving the truth of Shea's words.

They had their weapons bared and looked ready to attack at a moment's notice. The only reason they didn't charge right away was because they saw how many beastmen were in the group. Their leader surveyed the group, his eyes opening wide when he spotted Hajime.

"You're that boy from back then..."

Hajime, too, remembered this tigerman. He was Gil, the leader of the of the squad that had run into Hajime during his first trip to Haltina. He'd managed to survive through both raids.

"What are you here for this time... Wait, is that you, Altina-sama!? Are you alright!?" Gil cried out in surprise as he spotted Altina.

"Yes, I'm fine. These people and the Haulia clan saved me."

Once he'd confirmed her safety, Gil heaved a heavy sigh of relief.

"Thank goodness. Ulfric-sama was worried sick about you. You should hurry back to the city and let him know you're safe... Boy. Is it a policy of yours to rescue our countrymen every time you visit Haltina? I must say, it's a rather strange hobby for someone as arrogant as you, but... well, thanks."

"As if I'd have a policy like that. It's just coincidence."

Kouki and the others looked curiously at Hajime. They hadn't expected him to have other friends among the beastmen. Shea gave them a brief explanation of what had happened last time, including how Hajime had saved her family's lives. Kouki and the others nodded, finally understanding why she'd fallen in love with him.

"Anyway, are there any Haulia in Verbergen? If not, is there anyone who can tell me where their new village is?"

"Hm? There's a few Haulia in Verbergen right now. You've probably already heard, but we were attacked. After the empire retreated, a few them decided to stay in the city permanently."

"Perfect, that'll save me some time. In that case, that's where we'll go too. We won't have to wait outside until an elder shows up to let us in this time, will we?"

Hajime strode forward without waiting for a reply. *I see he hasn't changed a bit.* Gil thought to himself as he signaled his men to sheathe their weapons. A little exasperated, he took it upon himself to guide them the rest of the way.

Even though they'd just been raided by humans, none of the beastmen seemed wary of Hajime or his comrades. He wasn't sure if that was because the Haulia he'd trained had been the ones to save Verbergen, or if the elders had told everyone else not to oppose him,

but regardless of the reason, he was glad he didn't have to fight anyone this time.

When they arrived at Verbergen, Hajime found it radically changed from his last visit. The grand, imposing gate that he'd passed through before lay on the ground in splintered pieces. It appeared the beastmen hadn't found time to clear the wreckage away yet. Craters pockmarked the city's streets, and large boulders lay strewn about. The winding walkways and sweeping aqueducts crafted directly out of the trees' branches had been smashed here and there, making them unusable. The beautiful city that had once captivated Hajime was now a smoldering wreck.

"This is horrible..." Someone muttered. Hajime couldn't help but agree. A gloom hung over the city, and the wind that blew through had a distinctive chill to it.

One of the people walking down Verbergen's main street stopped when he spotted Hajime's party and stared at Altina in disbelief. A second later, he beamed and started running forward. His expression stiffened a little when he spotted unfamiliar humans next to her, but when she told him they were the ones who'd saved her his smile returned and he hugged her tight.

Many of the beastmen gave Hajime their thanks and rushed back to their homes as fast as they could. The reason became clear as soon, Hajime was surrounded by a huge crowd of Verbergen's residents. After a never-ending stream of thank yous the crowd finally began to disperse. The only person that remained was one Verbergen's elders, Ulfric Heipyst.

"Grandfather!"

"Oh Altina, I'm so glad you're safe..."

Tears pooling in her eyes, Altina buried herself in her grandfather's arms. Hajime idly recalled what Ulfric had told him on his last visit. That any beastman who was taken captive and brought outside of the sea of trees was considered dead. Because going after captured slaves would only lead to more casualties.

He must have thought he'd never get to see her again. A few of the onlookers teared up as well as they watched the touching reunion. Finally, Ulfric broke away, gave his granddaughter one last pat on the head and, turned to Hajime, a wry smile on his face.

"I must say, I wasn't expecting us to reunite like this, Hajime Nagumo. Nor did I think you would be the one to save my granddaughter. Fate works in mysterious ways, I suppose. At any rate, I thank you from the bottom of my heart."

"I just dropped her off here. If you want to thank someone, thank the Haulia. I'm only here because I need to deliver a message to them actually..."

“You’re the one who molded them into what they are. So in the end, it was your actions that saved my granddaughter, and my people. You can’t deny that. I owe you a greater debt than I can ever hope to repay, so at least accept my thanks.”

Hajime scratched his cheek awkwardly and shrugged his shoulders. Yue, Tio, Kaori, and Shea all watched over him with smiles on their faces. On the other hand, it irked Kouki that Hajime had done more to help the people of this world than he had, even though Kouki was the one who’d been training all this time to save everyone while Hajime had just been trying to find a way home.

Ulfric looked over Kouki and the others while continuing his conversation with Hajime.

“Unfortunately, the Haulia you’re looking for just left the city to go on patrol. They should be back soon, but...”

“In that case, is it alright if we wait here until they do? It looks like you guys need some help, and our healer’s been itching to get to work ever since we got here. What do you say? You’ll get quite a bit out of it too.”

“Hm? I’m not quite sure I understand what you’re getting at, but you are of course welcome to stay. Of course, I won’t ask for anything in return either. In fact, why don’t you come to my house? I’ll tell the guards to inform us when the Haulia return.”

Ulfric then started walking over to his house. Altina surreptitiously tried to grab Hajime’s hand under the pretense of guiding him, but was stopped short by Shea. Hajime ignored the silent staring contest that broke out between the princess of the elves and the overpowered bunny girl and turned to Kaori. Kaori smiled, realizing Hajime had already figured out what she was about to ask. Unable to hold back her happiness, she tried to hug him but was stopped short by Yue. The ultimate vampire princess and unstoppable girl in the body of one of god’s apostles started their own staring contest.

“See what I mean, Suzu? Once you grow accustomed to it, this feeling of alienation isn’t that bad.”

“Umm, Tio-san. Please stop treating me like we’re the same. I’m not a pervert like you...”

“If you ask me, I would say you have all the qualities needed to become a good one though...” Tio muttered softly as she watched Suzu cower behind Shizuku. Hajime shook his head in exasperation and followed behind Ulfric. Once inside, Altina brewed Hajime and the others some tea while they waited for the Haulia to return. Ulfric wasn’t sure what to think of how his granddaughter clearly seemed to be fawning over Hajime. For his part, Hajime pretended like he didn’t notice. Instead, he focused his attention playing with Shea’s bunny

ears. It was his way of reassuring her that he had no intention of making a move on Altina.

Around the time that they'd finished drinking their tea and exchanging information, Kaori flew in from Ulfric's window. His house was nestled in the trunks of a massive tree, and sat a good ten meters above the ground.

"Taking a break?"

Kaori shook her head at Hajime's question.

"Not quite. I finished healing everyone who was injured. I also restored the gate and the central areas of the city. And, well, I was thinking it'd be good practice if I could go out and restore the nearby villages too..." Kaori trailed off. Hajime could hear beastmen chanting her name in the distance. He and Ulfric stood up and stuck their heads outside of the window. Practically all of Verbergen was standing outside, cheering.

"Wait, I recognize some of those guys. Aren't they the other elders?"

"Indeed, that would be Zel and Guze. What has gotten into them?"

Unlike the other beastmen, they were making a beeline for Ulfric's house. It appeared they were terrified of the other beastmen's fanatic zeal and the speed with which Kaori had converted them.

Ulfric massaged his temples, fighting back a headache. Hajime started helping Kaori inside, then stopped when he heard a rush of footsteps.

Everyone turned toward the entrance, just in time to see the doors flung open. They were thrown backward with such force that the frames creaked.

"Boss! It's been ages since we last saw you!"

"We've been waiting for your return, Boss!"

"I-It is an honor to see you again, Sir!"

"Oi, newbie, go tell everyone else the boss' back! You've got thirty seconds!"

"R-Roger!"

The Haulia spilled into Ulfric's living room. Kouki and the others spit out their tea in surprise. Having already seen Par and the other's reactions they'd been somewhat prepared for the Haulia's enthusiasm, but they hadn't expected it to be so vehement. Once the initial outburst died down, they filed into ranks and saluted. Hajime noticed there were a few new faces among their number. Judging from their earlier words, Hajime guessed that they'd been recruiting and training rabbitmen from other clans in order to bolster their army.

"Uhh, yeah, it's been a while guys. Anyway, you're creeping out my comrades so can you stop with the salutes?"

"Sir, yes, sir!" Their cries were loud enough that the whole forest

probably heard them. Even the rabbitmen who weren't Haulia were swept away by the atmosphere and matched the volume of the hardened veterans who were overjoyed to see Hajime. It appeared they'd kept up his Spartan training regime even in Hajime's absence.

"I ran into Par on the way here so I more or less understand the situation. From the sound of it, you guys did pretty well. I know it couldn't have been easy, driving those demons out."

"W-We are undeserving of such praise, sir!" As Hajime had expected, the Haulia burst into tears. He gave them a moment to collect themselves then passed on the message Par had given him. Namely that they were planning on invading the imperial capital and were requesting reinforcements.

"I see. Thank you very much for taking the time to pass on Baltfeld the Executioner's words, Boss."

"Hey, uh... don't tell me you guys all have nicknames too."

"Us...? Heh, of course we do. I am Iorniks the Thunderclap! He who strikes with unpredictability and speed of lightning!"

"...I see."

It's too late for them. They've gone too deep. The pandemic started by "Baltfeld the Executioner" had infected every one of the Haulia. They were beyond salvation now.

Hajime sighed and changed the subject.

"Looks like you guys have been training recruits from outside the Haulia too. How many men do you have now?"

"Let me think... We accepted many promising youths from the clans close to us, and the remnants of the Banton clan came to us as well after they were defeated, so... at present we have 122 men in fighting shape."

Hajime, Shea, and Yue all looked up in surprise. That was far more than they'd been expecting. Hajime nodded to himself and looked up at Iorniks, who still seemed confused at the question.

"In that case, I can take you all at once. Ior...niks. Gather everyone you were planning on sending to the capital. I'll take you there."

"Huh?" Iorniks looked blankly at Hajime for a few seconds before realizing what he meant. "Ah! Roger! I'll gather everyone at once!" With a crisp salute, Iorniks—his real name was Io—ran back out of the house and started gathering his men.

Io couldn't believe that Hajime would assist them in assaulting the capital. Especially since it would mean putting the real reason he'd come here, conquering Haltina's labyrinth, on hold.

Shea was even more surprised than Io was. Her eyes opened wide and her bunny ears stood on end as she stared at Hajime.

"H-Hajime-san? What about the labyrinth..."

“You’re worried about Cam and the others, aren’t you?”

“Um... well... I am... but...” Shea faltered.

She knew Hajime had come here for the labyrinth, and that looking for Cam would have required going out of their way back to the capital he’d wanted to avoid. Which was why she hadn’t said anything. Moreover, Cam and the others hadn’t been kidnapped, they’d infiltrated the capital of their own volition. They had been prepared for the danger when they’d gone in.

Shea had made her decision when she’d asked to go along with Hajime back when they’d first met. She would go down her own path, and her family would go down theirs.

Of course, knowing that her father had gone missing still made her worried, but she knew she couldn’t just ask Hajime to turn back for him. But though she’d tried to hide her apprehension, the tension on her face and the slight droop to her rabbit ears had not gone unnoticed by Hajime or Yue. Even if she could hide it from the others, they’d known her for too long. Hajime walked up to Shea, who was still at a loss for words, and gently pinched her cheeks.

“Hweh?” She looked up at him, unable to comprehend the meaning behind his actions. Hajime returned her gaze, smiled awkwardly, and said resolutely, “You don’t have to force yourself to smile like that... I could tell your rabbit ears were drooping you know. If you’re worried about Cam, you just had to say so.”

“B-But...”

“No buts. What are you trying to hold back for after all this time? Just say what’s on your mind like you always do. Where’d all that boldness you had when I first met you go? If you’re not smiling, then... we can’t keep acting like normal either.”

“Hajime-san...”

Though his words were a little blunt, it was clear Hajime cared about Shea. Which was why he’d said what he had. Shea knew that as well, and she covered his hands with her own. Her eyes were brimming with joy.

“I know it might be hard to believe, but... well, look, I care about you. So if there’s something bothering you... I’ll do everything in my power to fix it.”

“Hajime-san, I...”

“So go ahead and say what you want to say. I’m listening.”

Shea basked in the warm sensation of Hajime’s hands on her cheeks and mustered her courage. She looked Hajime in the eyes and said, “I’m worried about my dad. Even if I don’t get to see him, I at least want to make sure he’s okay.”

“You should have just said so from the start. You were acting so reserved I thought something might be wrong with you.”

“Y-You’re making it sound like I normally don’t hold back at all! I can’t believe you, Hajime-san!”

Shea puffed out her cheeks at Hajime, though it was obvious she wasn’t really mad. Her eyes were sparkling and her cheeks were flushed. That was the face of a girl gazing at the boy she loved. Hajime’s words had filled her with such joy that she could barely contain it.

Shea hadn’t even realized she’d been trying to reign in her selfishness around Hajime. In truth, she’d just unconsciously been trying to show off her good side so that she wouldn’t lose to new contenders for Hajime’s affections. But after hearing those words, Shea no longer felt any need to hold back.

“Mmm... I missed that cheerful smile.” Yue watched over Shea like a protective older sister.

“Hmm, perhaps there are times when kind words truly are better than insults.” For once, Tio said something halfway normal. *Maybe I can finally cure her of her perverseness once and for all.* Hajime mused.

“Aww, I’m so jealous.”

“I guess anyone’d be happy hearing something like that from the guy they love.”

“Y-You’re surprisingly blunt now... Nagumo-kun. That part of you has definitely changed the most. I’m kinda surprised actually.”

“Shea-san... I’m so envious...”

Kaori, Shizuku, Suzu, and Altina all voiced their respective opinions.

Their comments reminded Shea she was still in public, and she bashfully buried her face in her hands. But her bunny ears and tail were still twitching happily.

Kouki glared at Hajime and muttered, “So you’ll still fight if it’s for your comrades...” His voice was subdued, but there was a hint of irritation in it. Seeing his best friend’s reaction, Ryutarou scratched his head, at a loss for what to say.

Just then, Io returned to the house. He’d finished rounding up the other Haulia. Honestly, he’d finished way faster than Hajime had expected.

Hajime said his goodbyes to Ulfric and the others, led everyone back to his airship, and took off toward the empire once more.

Chapter II: Roar of Revolution

If you were to ask a resident of Hoelscher's capital to describe the city, they would all give you the same answer: It's a mess.

The core of the capital had an organized layout with unadorned buildings lining the streets at regular intervals. But as they city had grown, houses and buildings had cropped up haphazardly, leaving the outer fringes a disorganized maze. Thanks to that, the streets were a jumbled mess as well. Numerous back alleys and side streets mixed together and connected with the main thoroughfares in baffling ways.

The entire city seemed like a sized-up version of Horaus, with the majority of residents looking like rough adventurer-types. Open-air stalls littered the streets, with their owners hawking their wares in loud, coarse voices.

Despite which, the city didn't seem in any way run-down or gloomy. If anything, there was an overwhelming sense of freedom to the place. Anyone and everyone did what they wanted however they wanted. Everyone was responsible for their own actions, but otherwise did as they pleased. As if they held to freedom as a creed to live by.

The Hoelscher Empire was a relatively new nation, founded only a few hundred years ago by the mercenary group that was instrumental to winning the last great war. Little wonder that it was a nation of fighters that valued strength above all. Almost every citizen knew how to fight, and considered their strength a point of pride. Some thought of that as barbaric, but others saw it as heroic. The empire also held the largest arena in the continent, and tournaments of all kinds were held multiple times a year.

"Oi, what the hell—Gah!?"

As always, thanks to Yue and the others Hajime attracted a lot of attention within the city. A number of hoodlums had already tried to pick fights with him, only to be crushed each time. The guy who'd come up to Hajime just now had been sent spinning through the air as well, before faceplanting onto the ground and getting a mouthful of dirt. What was surprising about this city was that no one batted an eye at Hajime's ostentatious displays of violence. Fights broke out every other hour here, so the citizens were used to it.

"Ugh, I'd heard rumors but... the capital really isn't a nice place."

"Yeah, this place makes my skin crawl. I'm glad we were summoned in the kingdom."

“Well, Hoelscher is known as a militaristic nation. I’m not surprised even those not part of the army are experienced fighters. It stands to reason the citizenry here to be more belligerent than in other nations. Though I must say, this is not the kind of place I would want to live in.”

From the sound of it, Shea, Kaori, and Tio didn’t like the capital one bit. Yue didn’t say anything, but she nodded in silent agreement. Kouki and Ryutarou, on the other hand, didn’t seem to mind the atmosphere. Shizuku, however, kept a close eye on her surroundings while Suzu hid behind her. It appeared this country wasn’t popular with the girls.

That being said, Kouki and the others didn’t exactly like it either. It was a bit too gritty for them, especially since they’d come from a peaceful country like Japan.

The biggest difference between the empire and the capital, though, was the presence of slaves. Shea watched with a pained expression as a group of them walked past.

“Just ignore them, Shea. We’ve got more important things to worry about right now.”

“Yeah, I know...”

But Shea couldn’t help but stare. She couldn’t stand seeing her brethren locked up in cages or being brought out to be bought and sold. Because of Hoelscher’s lax policies, the slave trade had flourished. Even beastmen children were captured and sold. Even if she wanted to avert her eyes from it, Shea couldn’t. Everywhere they went they saw slave markets or groups of slaves being taken away.

“Shea, are you okay?” Yue asked worriedly and squeezed Shea’s hand. Hajime walked over and pinched her cheeks as well. Seeing their concern for her heartened Shea, and bunny ears flopped around happily.

“I won’t forgive them. How could fellow humans do something... so vile.” Behind Hajime, Kouki came to a halt and grit his teeth. In Heiligh, the church’s influence was everywhere, which meant the people’s prejudice against beastmen was strong. However, because their hatred for beastmen was so great, they couldn’t even stomach keeping them as slaves. Hence why Kouki and the others hadn’t seen any in the kingdom, and why seeing them here affected them so badly.

Still, there’s nothing we can do about it right now... I swear if Amanogawa tries to pull something I’m just going to pretend I don’t know him. Well, as long as Shizuku the Rational’s with them, she won’t let them do anything stupid. She won’t... right?

Hajime glanced over at Shizuku. Noticing his gaze, she looked back at him. He surreptitiously pointed to Kouki. Sharp as always,

Shizuku picked up on what Hajime was trying to say with just that. She grimaced, and with a tired sigh, nodded. Shizuku sidled up to Kouki and whispered something to him. Kouki's expression turned sour, but he reluctantly nodded. Shizuku breathed another sigh, this time one of relief, and patted her chest. She then noticed Hajime smiling wryly at her, and glared at him. Hajime pretended not to notice and averted his gaze.

In an attempt to patch up the strained atmosphere, Kaori blurted out, "Oh yeah, didn't the emperor propose to you when he visited the kingdom, Shizuku-chan?"

"...Now that you mention it, I do remember something like that happening," Shizuku replied with a frown. She hadn't wanted to be reminded of that memory. The target of her glare changed from Hajime to Kaori. *Why did you have to go and bring that up?* Kaori hurriedly bowed her head in a silent apology.

The girls all turned to Shizuku with devilish grins on their faces. Meanwhile, Kouki's expression grew more sour. For once, Shizuku looked as unhappy as he did. Normally, being proposed to by royalty would be something to celebrate, but Shizuku didn't seem the least bit delighted about recalling that particular memory. It appeared she wasn't a fan of Emperor Gahard.

"More importantly, Nagumo-kun. Where exactly are we headed?" In order to fend off the army of girls who no doubt wanted to pry for details, Shizuku changed the subject. She knew they were here to find Shea's father, but she hadn't heard how Hajime planned to do that.

"Well for now, we're going to the adventurer's guild. If I flash my gold rank at them, they'll probably be willing to share all of their info with me."

"Do you think they've been captured?"

"I'm not sure. It's possible they got thrown in jail, or made into slaves... but they might also just be in hiding somewhere. Even if the capital isn't on high alert, you can tell the guards are being oddly vigilant. It's possible they were able to sneak their way in, but now have no way to get out..."

As Hajime had mentioned, the capital's guards appeared to be patrolling the streets in force. On top of that, they were doing thorough examinations of everyone who entered the city, and had posted entire squads to watch the walls. Patrols within the city were being done by three-man teams, and they were checking every nook and cranny of the city, including back alleys.

Hajime guessed the increased security was due to the recent demon invasions. It was because security had been so tight that Par and the others had yet to find an infiltration point. No rabbitman who wasn't a slave would be allowed entry into the city, and there was a

limit to how many pretend slaves Hajime could bring with him. For that reason, the reinforcements Hajime had brought with him were waiting in the shadows of a rocky outcropping at the outskirts of the city.

To be honest, I'm kind of wondering how Cam managed to get in here himself. Though Hajime had said he wasn't sure what had happened to them, it was more likely than not that they had been taken. Rabbitmen possessed the best stealth skills among the beastmen, and Cam's family had honed those talents to the limit. No matter how tight security was, they should have been able to ferry messages in and out of the city. The fact that they hadn't meant they'd probably been captured, or otherwise incapacitated.

Naturally, Hajime didn't expect the adventurer's guild to just tell him where Cam was. But there was a good chance he might find some rumors on their whereabouts, or the circumstances of their capture there.

Hajime stretched out his hand and pinched Shea's cheeks again. Though her mood had improved considerably, Shea still looked a little worried.

"Don't worry, Shea. Even if they got caught, there's no way the empire would just execute such rare rabbitmen. They'd probably want to interrogate them first, at least. And if they've been caught, that means all we've gotta do is free 'em again. I promise you, even if I have to burn this entire city to ash, I'll get them out of here."

"Yeah... Leave it to us, Shea. We'll grind them to dust."

"Hajime-san, Yue-san..."

Through the course of their journey, Shea's, Hajime's, and Yue's bonds had grown very strong indeed. After all, Shea had been with the pair of them the longest.

"Wait, wait, wait, you're not really going to burn the city down, are you? Your expressions look serious, but that was totally a joke right? Right? Please say it was a joke!" Shizuku cried, pale-faced. She could appreciate the loyalty the three of them showed for each other, but that didn't mean she could just ignore their declaration to slaughter thousands.

Kaori placed a hand on Shizuku's shoulder and shook her head. In a mournful voice, she uttered something rather depressing.

"Shizuku-chan, I'm sorry, but it looks like the capital's done for..."

"You're just giving up!? Kaori, you're a healer! You can't just ignore the plight of the people! You healed all those people back at Verbergen, right!? Why're you giving up now!?"

Do you really hate the empire that much, Kaori... Shizuku had thought that Kaori's violent tendencies only appeared when Hajime was concerned, but it appeared that wasn't the case. *Before she worries*

about healing others, she should focus on healing her own heart.

As the group continued joking with each other and walking down the main street, they noticed their surroundings begin to change.

Many of the buildings they were passing by now had been reduced to cinders, and rubble littered the streets. According to the snippets of conversation they heard from passerby, it appeared the monsters that had been kept locked up in the coliseum had suddenly transformed into powerful, vicious, beasts and rampaged through the city. These monsters, some of which had been over thirty meters tall, had destroyed entire sections of the capital, and slaughtered the squads sent out to eliminate them.

The demons had taken advantage of the confusion to assault the castle in an attempt to take Emperor Gahard's life. In Hoelscher, the emperor was effectively the strongest person in the country. Which was why the demons' assassination attempt had actually been thwarted, and they'd had the tables turned on them. After which the emperor had personally led a charge into the city and annihilated the monsters as well. However, there had been a great deal of civilian casualties before Gahard had been able to kill them all. In order to repair the damage to the city, the empire had captured a massive quantity of beastmen slaves. Everywhere Hajime looked, they were slaving away, laying the groundwork for the city's restoration.

It appeared the adventurer's guild was on the other side of the devastation, so they would have to cross it whether they wished to or not. Which meant they'd have to pass through the field of slaves as well.

Beastmen toiled without rest while their imperial overseers hurled curses at them. It was a tragic sight to behold. They'd been forced to bear the brunt of the consequences of the damage done to the capital. No matter how physically strong beastmen might be, even they wouldn't last long under such harsh conditions.

The fact that they continued to raid the sea of trees to replace all the beastmen who died to overwork rather than let them rest made it clear that the empire didn't even think of them as human. Though it was hard to tell if that was because of religious prejudice, or because of their ingrained doctrine of "survival of the fittest." As they walked, Hajime and the others saw a young dogman, barely ten years old, trip over a brick, sending the wheelbarrow of rubble he was holding falling to the side and spilling its contents everywhere.

It seemed he'd injured his leg in the fall, as he curled up in pain and made no motion to get up. The nearest overseer glared angrily at him and walked over, his club raised. His intentions were clear. Naturally, everyone's favorite ally of justice couldn't let this stand.

"Stop right—" Kouki dashed off toward the soldier. But he slowed

to a halt as he watched what happened next. There was a faint whoosh, and a second later the imperial soldier pitched forward, falling headfirst into the pile of rubble. There was painful thud, after which he lay motionless on the ground. He'd been knocked unconscious.

His fellow soldiers hurried over to him. After a cursory examination, they shook their heads in confusion. Then, annoyed and trying to get as little of his blood on them as possible, they grabbed their comrade by the arms and carried him off. Everyone had forgotten about the dogman.

He watched them go, dumbfounded, for a few seconds before returning to his senses and scrambling to his feet. He quickly gathered up all of the rubble he'd spilled and resumed transporting it like nothing had happened.

Kouki stared blankly, just as surprised as the boy had been. He came to with a start when Hajime called out to him from behind.

"I don't really care if you want to stick your neck out for other people, but could you at least do it in a way that doesn't cause trouble for us? Or even better, do it in a way that doesn't get noticed."

"Ah... Did you do that, Nagumo?"

Hajime nodded silently. He'd used his prosthetic arm's needle gun to knock the soldier out. Though Hajime had managed to save the boy before Kouki could even lift a finger, his attitude irked Kouki. Worse, Hajime had flipped Kouki's preachy switch.

"What do you mean, don't cause trouble for you? What's so wrong about wanting to save people, huh? Didn't you save that kid just now yourself?"

"More like I just solved an issue before you could blow it up. If you pick a fight with the imperials here, you're going to have to deal with their whole army. We're trying to look for people here, and making a huge fuss is not going to help with that. I'm begging you, just don't make a scene." Once again, Hajime emphasized that he didn't want anyone making a ruckus. He waved dismissively at Kouki, indicating the conversation was over. Kouki didn't take too kindly to that, and once again attempted to impress his ideals onto Hajime.

"Don't you feel anything for those poor beastmen being abused over there!? Look! Even now they're suffering!"

"Oi, Yaegashi. Do something about this moron. You're supposed to be in charge of him, aren't you?"

Of course, Hajime wasn't completely heartless. He'd saved Myu before, and if he saw children suffering, he did feel like he should help them if he could. Adults he could care less about, though.

However, he also had the discipline to properly prioritize things. Helping a few slaves here would make finding Cam harder, or possibly

result in him being killed, so he turned to Shizuku for help in handling Kouki. Shizuku rubbed her temples in frustration and turned to Kouki. Before she could say anything though, he interrupted her. It seemed Hajime turning to Shizuku for help irritated him as well.

“Shizuku’s got nothing to do with this! I’m talking to you right now, Nagumo! If you care so much about Shea-san, then how come you can’t share even a little of that concern for those beastmen suffering out there!?” Heads turned at Kouki’s loud outburst. Some of the imperial overseers came over to see what was going on as well. So long as Cam might potentially be in enemy hands, the last thing Hajime wanted was a fight with the empire. It would put their lives at risk.

Hajime narrowed his eyes and glared at Kouki. A powerful wave of Intimidation washed over him.

“Amanogawa. I said it before, but I really don’t care about your opinion, and I don’t feel like arguing with you about what’s right and wrong. We’re not comrades, we’re not friends, and we definitely don’t believe in the same things, so I have absolutely no intention of doing something just because you say so. All I did was allow you to accompany me for a bit. I suggest you quit trying to pick a fight. The next time you do something stupid... I’ll break your arms and legs and send you back to the kingdom.”

“Wha—”

Hajime canceled his Intimidation and continued with a sigh.

“On the other hand, I have no intention of convincing you to change your ways. As long as you’re not causing any trouble for us, you’re free to do as you like. But I won’t allow you to do anything that might put Cam and the others in danger. Also, don’t ask stupid questions. There’s no way I’d see other beastmen the same way I see Shea.”

Hajime shook his head and turned away. Slavery was a natural part of life in this world. While it was true the beastmen here were being horribly mistreated, the citizens here would see Hajime and the others as the bad guys if they tried to save them. To them, freeing a slave was akin to stealing.

If one wanted to help slaves in these circumstances, they needed to be prepared to see it all the way through. They needed the resolve to fight the entire empire, and force a society to never use slaves again. Unless they were able to manage that, their efforts would only make things worse. Even if they managed to free some slaves now, the empire would just come down even harder on the beastmen afterward, and make their lives more of a hell than they already were.

Hajime had no idea if Kouki understood that or not, but it seemed he was unwilling to give up. Even now, he continued to glare daggers

at Hajime's back.

"I know it sucks, Kouki. But we gotta go, for now at least."

"Right now we need to focus on Shea-san's family."

Kouki sighed. He knew Ryutarou and Suzu were just trying to comfort him, and it only made him feel worse. Seeing as he wasn't moving, Shizuku also called out to him.

"Kouki."

"...I know."

He nodded reluctantly. Hajime was more than capable of sending them all back home with a snap of his fingers. Kouki knew that he needed to get stronger. Strong enough to stand by his ideals. Stronger even than Hajime.

But in order to that, in order to obtain the ancient magic, he needed Hajime. No matter how much Hajime's methods sickened him, Kouki had no choice but to grin and bear it. As sticking with Hajime was the fastest way to get stronger.

Kouki swallowed down his complaints, repeated to himself to hold it in, and silently followed after Hajime.

"That boy seems to be struggling to sort out his emotions."

Tio strode up beside Shizuku and flashed her a smile.

"...No one's ever as simple as they look."

"Indeed they're not. Someone like you, who notices more than most has your fair share of hardships too, I imagine. Especially as you seem unable to abandon anyone who needs help."

Shizuku gulped when she saw Tio's serious gaze. Her usual perverted personality was nowhere to be seen.

"Feel free to ignore the prattling of this old woman if you wish, but... I think you should let yourself loosen up. If you spend all your time looking after others, you'll lose sight of your own desires. Besides, do you see that? You'll keep worrying those who care about you if you don't relax sometimes."

"Huh?"

Shizuku followed Tio's gaze.

"Shizuku-chan, are you alright? You keep making this scary face."

Kaori was standing right in front of her, a worried look on her face. Only when she looked down did Shizuku notice that Kaori was holding her hands.

"Heh, thanks for worrying about me, Kaori. But I'm alright. Well, I am a little worried about Kouki. But now that my best friend's got the body of a God's Apostle, I can count on you if anything happens, right?"

"Yep, just leave it to me, Shizuku-chan!"

Thanks to Tio's words and Kaori's presence, Shizuku was able to let go of the tension that had been building up inside her. She

followed after Hajime, her steps lighter than before.

With Kouki and the others still struggling with their thoughts, the party arrived at the adventurer's guild. The empire's guild branch was more of a bar than a proper guild. Tables were strewn about haphazardly among the wide main hall, and there were two counters at the front. The first was a standard reception counter, though the girl manning it had a far more wild look to her than the girls who'd been at other guilds Hajime had seen. The other counter was a fully stocked bar. Though it was still noon, half of the patrons were already drunk. *If you've got that much free time, why don't you help out with the reconstruction effort?* Hajime thought to himself.

As always, when Hajime and the others stepped through the front doors, everyone turned to look at them. More specifically, everyone turned to ogle Yue and the others. Hajime didn't want to deal with this right now, so he activated his Intimidation right from the start and walked up to the reception counter. However, the adventurers in the empire were cut from a different cloth than those in Horead or the capital. Instead of fainting, they instantly went on their guard. The lady at the counter had none of the cute cheerfulness the other guild receptionists had. She just stared lazily at Hajime, her gaze clearly saying "get on with it."

"I'm looking for information. Did any beastmen go on a rampage in this town recently?"

The receptionist stared suspiciously at him. Hajime knew it was a strange question to ask. If he'd wanted to find slaves, he would have been better served going to the merchant's guild. Besides, no slave would be able to go on a rampage. Their slave collars would put a stop to any resistance they might attempt. Furthermore, there were no beastmen in the city that weren't slaves. Which meant the thing Hajime was asking about should have been an impossible occurrence.

In the end, the receptionist pointed to the bar counter on the other side. Hajime couldn't tell if she was tired of dealing with him, or if that was just standard procedure here.

"Go ask the guy over there." Hajime looked where she was pointing and saw an old man with gray hair quietly polishing glasses. *Well, I guess it is the standard in RPGs to gather information at bars.* After foisting the work off onto her coworker, the receptionist turned away, signaling that she was done talking. Hajime smiled wryly and headed over to the bar.

The adventurers stared intently at Hajime and the others, sizing them up. Quarrelsome as always, Ryutarou responded by glaring back at every one of them. On the other hand, Suzu hid behind Shizuku and clutched at her sleeves. It was actually rather cute.

Hajime stopped in front of the barkeep and asked him the same

question he'd asked the receptionist. However, the barkeep ignored him and continued polishing his wine glass. Hajime narrowed his eyes dangerously, which finally got the man to respond.

"This is a bar. Kids don't belong here. And unless you're here to order alcohol, I've got nothing to say. Now get out."

Sheesh, that's as clichéd as it gets. But Hajime personally liked this particular cliché. The barkeep had the entire act down, including continuing to polish his glass long after it was sparkling. *I bet this means he'll take a liking to me if I down a whole bottle in front of him.* Excited at the prospect of acting out the role of an RPG protagonist, Hajime plastered on a stoic frown and slammed some coins on the table.

Hajime didn't notice how badly his chuuni tendencies were leaking out at that moment. Nor did he notice the exasperated look Yue gave him. After all, Hajime loved clichéd stuff like this.

"Alright, we'll do it your way. Barkeep, give me a bottle of the strongest stuff you've got."

"If you throw up, I'll toss your sorry hide out of here."

The barkeep's eyebrows twitched in surprise, but he didn't refuse Hajime's request. He grabbed a bottle off the shelf behind it and placed it in front of Hajime. The reason why he'd agreed was because the aura of Intimidation Hajime was giving off, coupled with the wary stares of the surrounding adventurers, had clued the barkeep in on the fact that Hajime was no ordinary kid.

Hajime brushed the bottle with his fingers, slicing the top off. The grace with which he did so caused everyone watching to gasp. Even the barkeep was surprised.

The pungent smell of alcohol wafted up from the open bottle, and both Kaori and Shea wrinkled their noses. Kouki and the others covered their mouths and took a few steps back.

"N-Nagumo-kun? Are you really planning on drinking that? I wouldn't recommend it."

"Y-Yeah. You're totally going to throw up. I feel like throwing up just smelling it."

"If you're going to drink Hajime-kun, can't you at least pick something that tastes better?"

"Kaori-san's right, Hajime-san. Why did you have to pick the worst-smelling one there is..."

Shizuku, Suzu, Kaori, and Shea all tried to talk him out of it. Even Yue tugged gently on Hajime's sleeve when she got a whiff of how bad it smelled.

"I can hardly ask for quality alcohol if I'm planning on chugging it down. That's like blasphemy." Hajime snuck a glance at the barkeep as he said that.

As he'd hoped, the old man was smiling slightly. *I knew he'd understand! This barkeep is clichéd through and through!* Hajime ignored the complaints of the girls and began guzzling down the foul-smelling concoction. Hajime and the barkeep were in perfect sync.

You watching this, barkeep? I'm sticking to the cliché, so you better like me after this. Hajime's chuuni soul manifested in the form of a mini-Hajime inside his mind. Said mini-Hajime started clutching his left arm like he was trying to hold in some unspeakable evil.

Hajime's gulping was the only noise inside the vast guild hall. In the span of a few seconds, he'd emptied the entire thing. He slammed the empty bottle back down on the counter, and grinned at the barkeep. "Happy now?"

"Alright, alright. You're a proper customer now."

The barkeep raised both hands in surrender, but his smile grew wider. What a wonderful, bitter old man.

"Hajime. Are you satisfied?"

"Yeah."

Hajime turned to Yue and nodded, the same giddy grin still on his face. He knew it was clichéd, but being able to act out a scene like this had been one of his dreams.

As an aside, no matter how much Hajime drank, he would never get drunk. One of his skills was Poison Resistance, which counteracted alcohol's effects. Back in Japan, his father had taught him how wonderful liquor could taste, and he'd actually become a fan of drinking. So it was a little disappointing that he'd never be able to experience drunkenness again.

"So, do you know anything about what I asked? I'm willing to pay for the info, of course."

"Don't worry about payment. Downing that bottle was payment enough for me. Would the beastmen you're referring to happen to be rabbitmen?"

"...Looks like you know something after all. Tell me the details."

It appeared coming here had been the right choice. According to the barkeep, there had been a big manhunt to capture runaway slaves a few days ago. During that manhunt, a group of insane rabbitmen had beaten down squad after squad of imperial soldiers, then tried to make their escape. Unfortunately, there had only been a few dozen of them, and a few hundred imperial soldiers. Eventually they'd been surrounded and overwhelmed through sheer force of numbers. All of them had been captured and sent to the castle.

Their rampage had actually become the talk of the town, so Hajime could have asked basically anyone in the city and obtained the same information.

"The castle, huh...?" Hajime turned to Shea. As expected, her

expression was dark. She knew what fate awaited those who were caught trespassing in the capital. Cam and the others didn't have a bright future ahead of them.

The fact that they'd been taken alive meant there was still hope though.

Male rabbitmen weren't as popular as sex slaves for obvious reasons, though there were a few nobles whose interests lay in that direction. However, there was almost no demand for older men like Cam, who were already in their forties. However, these particular rabbitmen had attacked the empire. Shea had expected them to be executed on the spot once they'd been captured. That would have been the normal punishment.

If the empire hadn't done so, it was because they saw some value in taking Cam and the others alive. Which meant chances were, they were still alive even now. Hajime squeezed Shea's hand under the counter in an attempt to reassure her. Yue, too, grabbed her other hand and squeezed gently. Encouraged by their support, Shea turned to them and nodded resolutely.

The barkeep turned to Shea and examined her with great interest. There weren't many rabbitmen with blue hair like her. He could more or less guess her relationship with the rabbitmen the empire had captured earlier. Hajime knew the barkeep had caught on, but he didn't stop his questions.

"Barkeep. What can you tell me about the imperial castle? I'll pay whatever you want."

"That's not the kind of thing you should be joking about, kid... Though I guess you're not joking..."

Hajime smiled at the barkeep, but this time the smile didn't reach his eyes. He'd had his fun earlier, now it was time to get serious. The barkeep faltered, cold sweat pouring down his forehead. He felt as if he was being stared down by a hungry predator.

If he wasn't careful about his answer, he would be branded a traitor to the empire. The adventurer's guild might have been an independent organization beholden to no nation, so technically the barkeep couldn't actually betray the empire. But the empire was his home, and more importantly, if word of this got out to the emperor, they wouldn't let him off lightly.

It was an implicit rule among adventurers to turn a blind eye to any potentially unsavory things one of their own were planning. But this still wasn't information the barkeep wanted to part with.

That being said, he could tell from the pressure this young man was emitting that refusing to answer would not end well for him. So, as a compromise, instead of explaining things himself he reluctantly decided to sell out—err, tell—Hajime about someone who could help

him.

“Look for a man in the fourth patrol squad called Nedil. He used to be a prison guard in the palace.”

“Nedil... Alright, I’ll go find him. Thanks, you were a huge help.”

Hajime knew the barkeep would have reservations about answering, and it was entirely possible he just didn’t know anything. So he was glad the barkeep had pointed him to someone who did.

The barkeep breathed a sigh of relief as Hajime strode out of the building under the watchful eyes of every adventurer in the room. As they walked down the main street, Shea turned to Hajime and asked, “Umm, Hajime-san. Did you ask about the castle because...”

“Yeah. I’m planning on figuring out where the prison is, and sneaking in tonight. Yue and I will handle the information gathering, so the rest of you just find a place to eat or something. We’ll be back in a few hours.”

Shea and the others looked at him in confusion.

“Hm? Why just you two? Shouldn’t we all go together... Wait! Don’t tell me you plan on sneaking off with Yue-san so you can do naughty things like you always do!”

“Wha!? Is that why, Hajime-kun!? No, I won’t allow it! How could you think of such a thing when Shea’s family is in trouble!?”

“It’s simply unfair that only Yue gets to partake. Master, allow me to join in as well.”

“Like hell that’s why! And stop shouting that kind of stuff in the middle of the street. Do you all take me for some kind of repressed horndog or something!?” Hajime retorted hotly. The scene was made even more misleading by Tio caressing her butt and squirming suggestively. Just then, someone tugged on his sleeve. Hajime turned to see Yue blushing and looking up at him.

“We’re going to do it outside?”

“No we’re not.”

“Then are we finding somewhere inside to do it?”

“No, we’re just not doing it, so drop the subject already.”

“Hmph, fine. I’ll just have to prepare for a night raid then.”

“By night raid, you mean our plan to infiltrate the castle, right? Right?”

Yue’s jokes were always like this. At least, Hajime hoped this was a joke. Surely Yue licking her lips seductively and looking at Hajime like he was a piece of prime steak were all part of the act.

Shizuku and the others, who weren’t used to these exchanges, looked on in shock.

“Sh-Shizushizu, what do I do!? I just heard something crazy right now! I can’t even process it!”

“I suspected that was how their relationship was... But to think

Kaori hasn't done it yet. How should I handle this? Should I cheer her on as her best friend, or tell her she's too young for this sort of thing? I'm not sure... This is beyond my abilities to handle!"

Despite her perverted attitude, Suzu was surprisingly pure. She blushed bright red and hid behind Shizuku. Meanwhile, Shizuku herself was fretting over Kaori like a mother worried about her daughter. On the guys' side, Ryutarou was glaring at Hajime while cursing him under his breath. Kouki had taken such a huge shock that he was staring lifelessly out in the distance. Finally, nondescript citizens A, B, C, etc. all the way up to Z stood rooted to the ground, captivated by Yue's seductive smile.

What kind of crazy fetishes does she have!? Blood pounding, Hajime tried to resolve the misunderstanding as calmly as possible.

"You guys, cut it out. I'm taking Yue because if this Nedil guy doesn't want to talk, we're going to need some 'persuasion' to convince him he should. And she's the best at that. Plus she can use restoration magic."

"I can use restoration magic too, so..."

Hajime cut her off by shaking his head. If Nedil was part of the army, there was no way he'd be willing to talk. So they'd have to torture the answers out of him.

Kaori may have been more than skilled enough with restoration magic, but she was wholly unsuited to torture. Shizuku realized that as well, and tried to placate her best friend.

"Kaori, leave this one to Yue."

"Shizuku-chan..."

Kaori had more or less figured out what Hajime had in mind as well. And normally, she would have argued back. She was tired of letting Yue carry the burden of doing all the dirty work. After all, Kaori's aptitude for restoration magic was even higher than Yue's. It wasn't so much that she wanted to insist on going with Hajime everywhere, that she just didn't want Yue to have to shoulder everything.

But right now, Shea's family was in danger, and every second counted. They didn't have time to waste while Kaori argued her point. So Kaori gave Yue an apologetic look and obediently backed off. Yue shrugged her shoulders, indicating that there was nothing to be concerned about.

Once everything was decided, Yue and Hajime strode off into the crowd. Before they vanished from sight, Shea called out to them.

"Hajime-san, Yue-san! Umm..." She faltered, unable to find the right words to say. Hajime smiled gently at her. He knew he'd told her not to hold herself back around him, but that didn't change the fact that she'd gotten them wrapped up in this mess just before they'd

headed off to another labyrinth.

In the end, she couldn't figure out how to express what she was trying to say, and returned Hajime's smile.

"Try to keep it in your pants, okay!"

"You ruined the moment, you worthless rabbit!"

Hajime yelled back and pulled Yue—who was giving Shea a thumbs-up—along with him. Before long, he'd vanished into the crowd.

A few hours later, Hajime and the others sat around a table in a restaurant in some corner of the city. The atmosphere around the table was chilly, and the source of the discord was of course, Hajime. Ever since Hajime and Yue had returned from their intelligence-gathering, the girls had been giving him cold stares. If looks could kill, Shea's and Kaori's glares would have ended Hajime's life a thousand times over. In fact, even he was a little scared of them right now. Especially since he could see the demon stand forming behind Kaori.

"It looks like the two of you had a lot of fun."

"Is it just me, or is your skin glossy now, Yue? I wonder why that might be. Hey, would you mind telling me how you got it like that? Well?" Their monotone voices were so terrifying all the nearby guests had left. Ryutarou and Kouki had attempted to make their escape as well, but Suzu had caught them with a barrier. Both of them were now sitting meekly in their chairs as they watched events unfold.

Tio had just sighed wearily when she'd seen the two of them, but surprisingly even Shizuku was glaring daggers at Hajime. He could understand why Ryutarou and Kouki had wanted to flee. When they'd returned from their excursion, Yue's skin had looked glossier than before, while Hajime appeared rather haggard.

In other words, it was obvious that they'd gotten it on while they'd been out collecting information.

"Don't misunderstand. The reason Yue looks like that is because she drank my blood."

"What?"

Seeing as they all seemed to be misunderstanding, Hajime sighed and began to explain. Shea and Kaori looked at Hajime with shocked expressions. They hadn't been expecting that.

"You didn't really think I'd go on a fucking spree now of all times, did you? I'm not a dog in heat, you know. Do you guys really think that little of me, huh?"

"Ahahahaha, of course not. We knew that. R-Right, Kaori-san?"

"Y-Yeah! Of course we did, Shea. Restoration magic takes up a lot of mana, so of course I knew something like that might happen."

Unable to bear Hajime's angry stare, the two of them averted their gaze and tried to play innocent. Satisfied, Hajime turned to Shizuku

and Suzu. They blushed furiously and turned away. It seems they too had gotten the wrong idea.

“Haaah... Well, whatever. I got the information I was looking for. We’re going to infiltrate the prison Cam’s in tonight. Apparently they’re under pretty tight watch, but that shouldn’t be a problem for us. The only people going into the castle are going to be me, Yue, and Shea. It’ll be best to have only people who can mask their presence or use teleportation magic in case anything goes wrong. Kaori, I want you and the others to wait outside the capital with Par and the others. Once we get Cam’s group out, we’ll be teleporting them directly to you.”

“That’s not a bad plan, but... Are you sure your information’s accurate? What if that Nedil guy was lying to you?”

Shizuku voiced a rather reasonable concern. However, Hajime just shook his head.

“Not possible. We crushed his balls in front of his eyes, restored them before he lost consciousness, then did it again over and over until he finally talked. No guy could withstand that kind of torture. Even I felt kinda bad for him after we were done. Poor guy was a mess.”

If you felt bad about it, why’d you do it!? Kouki and the others thought. They would have said it aloud, but they could tell from Hajime’s plastered on mournful expression that anything they said would be ignored. So they just sighed instead. Shizuku mentally patted herself on the back for not letting Kaori go this time.

What truly scared Kouki and Ryutarou was how Yue didn’t seem to think anything at all of destroying a man’s balls over and over. It seemed the rumors they’d heard in the capital, that she was the legendary “Ball Crusher” were true after all. They swore in their hearts never to cross her. At the same time, they covertly covered their nether regions.

“Hey Nagumo... I know it’s a bit late to be asking this now, but if the emperor’s got Shea-san’s family captive, can’t we just ask him to let them go? Lily should be in the castle right now, and I am technically a hero, so... I’m sure we could persuade them if we just talk it out...” It was more than just “a bit late.” But he did have a point. Not even the emperor could flat-out refuse a request from the hero, especially if Liliana gave her support to his cause. Hajime could show off his overwhelming strength to force the emperor to negotiate too.

However, there was one flaw.

“And how are you planning on compensating him for letting them go?”

“What?”

“Not only did Cam’s guys infiltrate the city, they killed the empire’s soldiers. And the fact that rabbitmen like them could fight on even footing with the empire at all is an anomaly. We can’t pretend to be acting under god’s orders, either. The princess would have told the emperor the truth about that by now. You really think he’ll release them for free just because we asked?”

“Well...”

“It’s obvious he’ll ask for something in return. Way more than we want to pay too. The empire’s gotta save face somehow if it releases Cam. There’s no way they’ll just let him walk out of here without getting their money’s worth. Plus, it might make it harder for the princess to negotiate for aid. You sure you still wanna just go in and ask?”

Kouki fell silent. Hajime did have a point. Naturally, Hajime didn’t care how it might affect Liliana’s negotiations, and honestly if the emperor had asked him for reparations he’d let him eat a faceful of missiles. The only reason he’d opted for breaking Cam and the others out of prison instead of attempting negotiations was because doing things this way was less of a hassle. After all, if it was likely to devolve into a fight anyway, might as well go in guns blazing.

“Leaving the money aside for now, you’re right that causing trouble for Lily... wouldn’t be good. But, still...”

Kouki felt that since he was part of this party for now, he had to contribute somehow. After the incident with the slave boy, he’d been itching to prove he could be useful too. Sensing that Kouki was about to cook up another troublesome idea, Hajime turned back to Shizuku. She noticed his gaze and shook her head. It seemed it was too late for her to stop his rampage.

Worried that Kouki might do something colossally stupid to “help” Hajime during his infiltration, he quickly devised a way to redirect Kouki’s energies.

“Hey, Amanogawa. There’s something I need you to help me with...”

“Wha!? Did... you just... say you need help? No way...”

Hearing the word “help” come from Hajime’s mouth had shocked Kouki speechless. Ryutarou and Suzu were both stunned as well. They couldn’t have been more surprised if they saw a UFO in the middle of town. That was just how rare Hajime asking for help was to them.

Hajime had expected that reaction, so while it irked him a little he was able to keep his emotions off his face.

“You know what, on second thought, forget it. I shouldn’t ask you to take on such a dangerous job. Forget I asked.”

“W-Wait! Please! At least tell me what it is!”

Kouki fell for Hajime’s act hook, line, and sinker. “Well, the

castle's supposedly under extremely heavy guard. That's going to make sneaking in difficult. In order to increase our chances of success, we're going to need a diversion. Something like that stunt you pulled before when you tried to save that slave kid. We need someone to start a commotion to draw away the guards. But now that I think about it, it really is too dangerous. Don't worry about it."

Of course, Hajime and the others would have no problems sneaking in no matter how tight the watch was. A diversion certainly might help, but it was by no means necessary. This was just the most believable excuse Hajime could come up with to make Kouki feel like he was helping. If Kouki was going to go on a rampage either way, Hajime would at least like to control the way in which he did. Whatever it took for him to not follow after Hajime.

"Make a commotion... by saving those kids... Sounds good. I'll do it, Nagumo! Let me handle the diversion!"

"O-Okay, if you're sure. Thanks man... I guess you really are a hero."

Shizuku, sharp as always, saw through the whole act. She glared angrily at Hajime. He couldn't tell if she was mad he'd deceived her childhood friend, or because he'd effectively volunteered her for this pointless diversion as well. Hajime pretended not to notice and opened up his Treasure Trove.

"Alright, if you're willing to cooperate, let me give you some things that'll help. Here's a gift for the justice-loving hero and his team."

Hajime pulled out a few chunks of ore and transmuted them into four masks. They completely covered the face and came in different colors. Red, blue, yellow, and pink. Much like the masks of a certain set of rangers. Hajime had made sure to keep the masks breathable, and the eyeholes large enough to not obstruct the wearer's vision. Such detailed transmuting wasn't something any Synergist could do. It was a rather pointless display of skill, but Hajime liked to be thorough about everything he did.

"Nagumo... What are these?"

"Can't you tell just by looking at them? Masks."

"...Why'd you make them?"

"You do realize it'd be a problem if the hero went on a rampage in the imperial capital for no good reason, right? We need to hide your identity. That's what the masks are for. You know, heroes always wear masks to hide their faces. In fact, a hero *is* their mask. I even made them different colors so you could tell each other apart."

"Uhh, I get that you're enthusiastic about this, but... well, I guess you're right that we need to keep our identities secret. It'd be bad if we caused trouble for Lily... but you know..."

Kouki stared at Hajime the sentai lord with an exasperated expression.

“Don’t worry, great hero (snicker) You get to be red, the leader’s color.”

“Are you making fun of me?”

“Sakagami, you get blue. The calm and collected blue ranger. I debated giving you black, but I think blue fits better after all. You should be glad I put so much thought into this.”

“O-Okay? I don’t really get it, but I guess I’ll take it.”

“Cool. Now Taniguchi, you’re going to be...”

“P-Pink, right? It’s a little embarrassing, but...”

“Yellow. The most forgettable one. Also, the one who gets excited too easily. I’d say it suits you perfectly.”

“...Do you hate me or something, Nagumo-kun?”

“And finally... for Yaegashi we have...”

“Hold it right there, Nagumo-kun. The only color left is... You’re not serious, are you?”

“Of course I am. Yaegashi, you get pink. This is the color that’s best for you.”

“I refuse! Besides, aren’t there plenty of other ways to hide our identities that don’t require wearing masks? Can’t we just wrap some cloth around our mouths or something!? You’re just toying with us, aren’t you, Nagumo-kun!?”

Hajime shook his head in mock disgust. Shizuku’s eyebrows twitched angrily. She didn’t enjoy being treated like an unruly child.

“Listen up. This is the best way to completely hide your identity 100%! Not only do they have metal fastenings that will never come undone unless you take them off yourself, they even absorb impact damage. Plus, they’re lighter than air and impervious to pretty much any kind of slashing attack!”

“I-I can’t believe you managed to make something so impressive in an instant... Why do you have to put your crazy skills to use in the weirdest of ways?”

“Yaegashi, everyone knows that aloof, calm beauties like you have a secret soft spot for cute things. It’s practically required. Or well, more like Kaori told me. But the point is, you like cute things. That’s why I decided you should get pink. Be grateful.”

“Wh-What’s with that arrogant attitude... B-Besides, it’s not like I’m that into cute... Anyway, Kaori! Just what did you tell him!?”

“Ehehe, just all the things I find cute about you, Shizuku-chan. Like how your room is filled with stuffed animals...”

How could my best friend betray me like this!? I mean I guess I never told her not to tell people or anything, but why’d she have to blab to Nagumo-kun of all people!? Shizuku glared at Kaori, who was blushing

shyly. Unfortunately, everyone's favorite hero decided now was the best time to add fuel to the fire.

"Come to think of it, you've always been fond of animals. Like bunnies, and cats... Small, cute things mostly."

"!?"

"Oh yeah, wasn't your phone wallpaper a cute bunny too, Shizushizu?"

"!?"

"And any time we go to the arcade you always go straight for the UFO catcher games. You've gotten pretty good at them too."

"!?"

"I get it now. So that's why you're always sneaking glances at my bunny ears, Shizuku-san."

"N-No!"

"Go on, Yaegashi. Take it. Pink... embodies you." Hajime held out the pink mask while giving Shizuku a warm, gentle look. For some reason, everyone else was looking at her like that too. As if they were watching proudly over their daughter's graduation. The atmosphere made rejecting the mask near impossible.



“What the heck is with you guys... Let me just say this now, I really don’t like pink that much. I’m only taking it because I have no choice, it’s not like I actually want it. Also, everyone likes small animals, okay? It’s not just me, so there’s no special meaning behind me liking them too... Hey, quit looking at me like that, guys!”

Ears bright red, Shizuku reluctantly accepted the mask. Upon seeing how hard Shizuku was trying to hide her embarrassment, Shea sidled up to her and whispered, “I don’t mind letting you touch my ears, if you want.”

A broad smile split Shizuku’s face, and she forgot all about how mortified she was.

In truth, the reason Hajime had pushed the masks so hard was because he wanted revenge. He was hoping that by sending a group of colorfully masked kids to rampage around the capital, they’d create a legend that was even more cringy than the nicknames the Haulia had tried to give Hajime.

He still hadn’t forgotten how they’d been laughing at him back then.

Unfortunately, even if this worked it wasn’t like anyone would associate Shizuku and the others’ nicknames directly with them. But for now, this was the best he could manage. Yue could tell that Hajime’s real reason for the masks was because he wanted to get some petty revenge, and she gave him an exasperated look.

That night. In a dark corridor, where no light reached, there was a row of rooms whose walls were metal bars. The bars were made of a special, extra-sturdy ore, and were reinforced with magic circles that kept inhabitants of the room trapped within. Whoever was stuck in these rooms would have a hard time getting out. The entire corridor reeked of blood and filth, and it was clear the rooms were dirty even if one couldn’t see them.

This was the state of Hoelscher Castle’s dungeons. They had been designed to mentally whittle down prisoners, driving them into a corner psychologically and physically. As one would expect of the empire’s most secure dungeon, the walls were nigh unbreakable, and magic circles were arrayed throughout the corridors to prevent anyone from escaping.

All of the traps in the dungeon were designed to be non-lethal, but as excruciatingly painful as possible. They were setup so that both those who might try to escape and those who might be trying to sneak in would have to deal with multiple layers of them. Some traps were even hidden within the walls. Unless one knew the specific chants that dispelled these traps, they would have a hard time moving around in

here. If someone was left alone in this hell, they would go crazy in a single day. There was no light, it smelled godawful, and there was no hope of escape. Even the guards who watched over the dungeon mostly stayed in the guardroom outside and avoided going near the prisons as much as possible. The only time they went inside was during their scheduled patrols.

And yet, on this night, cheerful voices rang out within the dungeon of despair.

“Hey, how many of yours did they break today?”

“All of my fingers and two ribs... you?”

“Heh, looks like I win. They broke all of my fingers and *three* ribs.”

“Hah, that’s the best you’ve got? They took out seven of my ribs, and my cheekbones... Oh, and one of my ears.”

“Seriously? What the hell did you say to them, man? They said we might be useful later so they’re not supposed to touch our ears...”

“Nothing special. They kept on asking me ‘Who’s the one who sent you’ and stuff like that. I got tired of their nagging so I just told them, ‘Your mom. I just came here to see how my kids are doing, you know.’”

“Whoa, no wonder they snapped.”

“But wasn’t it that emperor guy who told them not to touch our ears? They’re probably gonna get in deep shit for disobeying orders...”

“Yeah, those bastards are totally getting executed. Kakaka, serves those fuckers right!”

The recently captured Haulia were competing to see who’d been tortured the hardest. As the empire wanted them alive their more serious wounds had been treated with healing magic, but they had still been beaten to within an inch of their lives. And yet, they seemed as lively as ever. Of course, that was just their way of withstanding the situation they’d been put in. They hadn’t gone crazy or anything. Far from it. They’d just been prepared for this from the moment they’d attacked the capital. Now that they had been captured, there was no future for them. Either they would be executed, or they’d be turned into slaves. And they would rather commit suicide than live as slaves, so either way they wouldn’t live very long. If they were made into slaves, they would be forced to fight their own comrades. Death was preferable to that.

Since they were dead men either way, the Haulia figured it was better to spend their last days living life to the fullest. Because of how abnormal their strength had been, the empire was convinced that someone else was backing the Haulia.

Even if that weren’t the case, the emperor, Gahard, had taken an interest in them. He wanted to use the Haulia in his own army, if

possible. Gahard valued strength, and the Haulia had it in spades. Their tactics, their weapons, their mentality, and even their training methods were all completely out of the ordinary. The Haulia knew that, and that was precisely why they'd resolved to defy the empire until the moment of their deaths. They would never work for Gahard. It was because of that ironclad resolve that they could joke so lightheartedly about their wounds. Because of their cavalier attitude, the soldiers who had to torture them were growing terrified of these unbreakable rabbitmen. The Haulia's fearless grins struck fear into the hearts of their jailors.

"I bet they're giving our chief the third degree right now..."

"You know it. Hey guys, how about we make a bet on how badly beaten up he'll be when he comes back?"

"Oh? Sounds good. I'll bet they cut off both of his ears."

"That's way too much of a long shot, man."

"I mean, our chief's started becoming a lot more like Boss recently, so he probably pissed them off to hell and back. I mean just look at how he trains our new recruits..."

"Yeah, sometimes it almost feels like I'm looking at Boss. If our chief said that kind of stuff to the soldiers... I could see him losing his ears..."

"Well, Boss would never let himself get caught like this in the first place. And if he somehow did, he'd probably crush this prison from the inside and escape!"

"Man, I'd feel bad for the empire if they ever got on the wrong side of Boss. He'd wipe this city off the map."

"Yeah, he's got no mercy at all!"

"He's one hell of a monster, our boss is."

"More like he's the devil."

"Yeah, I could totally see him being as scary as that demon lord guy."

"Come on guys, you're making it sound like he's on the same level as the demons. Boss could probably crush that pathetic demon lord like a bug. Wouldn't even break a sweat."

"So what... is he like a demon god at this point or something?"

"Yeah!"

"Well aren't you maggots looking lively. Can't believe this is how you greet me after all this time."

"....."

The Haulia only now realized that this new voice was dripping with anger. And it was one they remembered quite well. They all fell quiet. Everyone shrunk back in their cells and held their breath, praying the storm would pass them by.

"Oi, don't just go quiet on me you bastards. Weren't you just

having fun talking about how I'm a monster and a demon god? Well?"

"Hahaha, sorry guys. Looks like I'll be going on ahead of you. I've started hallucinating that Boss is here..."

"Don't worry, it's not just you. Looks like I'll be coming with you."

"Oh, so it's not just me... But to think the last thing I'll ever hear is Boss' yelling..."

"I wish it could have been a cute girl's voice instead..."

The idea of Hajime being here was so unthinkable to the Haulia that they believed they were hearing things. Or perhaps they just wanted to believe they were hearing things, because the alternative was scarier. But of course, Hajime wasn't nice enough to let them have their fantasies. Yue summoned a ball of light, illuminating the dingy dungeon. Hajime's profile was reflected clearly in the eyes of the rabbitmen.

"Geh, Boss!?"

"Shut up, you morons."

"...Looks like they're still lively."

"Those wounds *are* pretty terrible but... now I feel like an idiot for worrying so much."

Though the Haulia were hurt so bad it was a wonder they could still move, they didn't seem bothered by their wounds at all. Hajime, Yue, and Shea sighed in amazement.

"Wh-Why are you here, Boss?"

"I'll explain later. For now, let's get you guys out of here... Sheesh, I can't believe you're still so lively after all that torture. Just how tough are you guys?"

"Hahaha! We did get trained by you personally, after all."

"Compared to your training, this torture's nothing."

"Those guys just don't have any killing intent behind their blows, you know? They're so weak I thought they might be trying to heal me for a second."

"Or maybe you're just that good at intimidating people, Boss. When you looked at us like you wanted to kill us, we thought we'd actually die."

The Haulia continued joking with each other, coughing up blood all the while. Meanwhile, Shea and Yue turned angrily toward Hajime. This demon god was the one responsible for turning the kind rabbitmen into fearless warriors after all.

Hajime cleared his throat awkwardly and used his Demon Eye to locate all of the dungeon's traps. Once he'd found them, he got to work dismantling them. Normally, magical traps like these could only be deactivated with the proper incantation. That was because the mana stored within the magic circle needed to be dispersed via a very delicate process, or the trap would trigger.

Destroying the magic circle outright was another option, but in general they were designed to activate upon destruction, or at least notify the caster that they'd been destroyed. If one wanted to be stealthy about it, they had no choice but to use the right incantation. Of course, only certain people were informed of what that incantation was, but ultimately, that incantation was a method to manipulate one's mana in a specific way. Which meant that anyone who could freely manipulate their mana had no need for said incantation. Hajime easily disarmed the empire's most secure prison in a matter of seconds, then got to work transmuting the bars of everyone's cells. Meanwhile, Yue used restoration magic to heal everyone's injuries.

"Haaah, you never cease to amaze me, Boss. Anyway..."

"Thank you so much for saving us!"

"No problem. And well, I did it for Shea. So don't worry about it. More importantly, where's Cam? I don't see him anywhere."

"Well, you see..."

One of the Haulia explained that Cam was currently being tortured, and told Hajime which room he would be in. The Haulia naturally wanted to help Hajime rescue their chief, but he really didn't need any assistance. They knew that as well, especially considering he'd managed to make it all the way here without getting noticed, so they obediently agreed to stay behind when Hajime asked. The way in which they shivered in excitement when Hajime ordered them crept him out a little, but now wasn't the time to dwell on that.

Hajime pulled a palm-sized plate out of his Treasure Trove. The polished gray metal shined with a dull light, and there was a magic circle carved into the handle. The opposite side was made up of various jagged edges. Put simply, it looked like an oddly-shaped key.

The Haulia watched, wide-eyed, as Hajime poured mana into the metal plate and thrust it out in front of him. The key seemingly fit into some sort of invisible lock, as it disappeared into empty space. A second later, shockwaves rippled outward from the plate. Once the shockwaves had grown to a decent size, Hajime twisted the key-plate. A hole appeared in the empty space in front of Hajime, and rapidly grew to the size of an average person. Rocks and boulders could be seen on the other side of the hole.

This was Hajime's latest artifact, the spatial magic imbued Gate Key. It worked in conjunction with another artifact, the Gate Hole. By using the Gate Key, Hajime could open a portal to wherever the Gate Hole was, and instantly teleport there.

"Alright, you guys go out through here. It leads to a rocky field near the outskirts of the capital. Par and the others are waiting there for you."

"Yes, sir! We're counting on you to bring our chief back, Boss."

What Hajime had just done was beyond anything the Haulia had ever seen, but they were disciplined enough to follow orders even through their surprise. Besides, they were used to their boss doing impossible things one after another. They gave Hajime a crisp salute, and walked single file through the gate. They really were well-trained.

Once the Haulia were through, Hajime closed the gate and headed to where Cam was. They slipped past the heavy guard using a combination of their innate skills and magic, easily making it to where Cam was being held. Hajime silently dispatched the guards outside Cam's door and stopped to listen to the angry yelling coming from inside. Shea stiffened when she heard the shouting. When she thought about how badly the other Haulia had been beaten, she couldn't help but worry about what they might be doing to her father. Especially because he was probably purposely provoking them. Seeing her expression, Hajime decided not to waste any time. He grabbed the doorknob, but stopped when he realized who was doing the yelling.

"What kind of pathetic punches are those!? You call yourself an imperial soldier!? Put your back into it, you worthless maggot! Even a kitten could hit harder than that, trash! What do you think this is, a fucking picnic!? Is that really all you got!? Come on, you can't even break a single bone with that limp-dick fist! You're nothing but spineless, gutless, trash!"

"Sh-Shut up! Why the hell are you the one lecturing me!?"

"Stop moving your mouth and start moving your hands! What are you, some kinda sissy? I bet your girlfriend's as much of a wuss as you are! Suits a pansy loser like you!"

"You bastaaard! Don't make fun of Natasha!"

"S-Stop, Johan! If you keep going he'll die!"

"Hmph, so you're as much of a spineless wimp as this maggot here, huh? Looks like there's nothing but scum in the imperial army! Might as well start calling yourselves the bitch army instead, you cowards! Stop flapping your gums and get serious! Hit me like you're trying to kill me!"

"What the hell is with this guy!? He's insane! There's no way he's actually a rabbitman! Someone else take over, I can't do this!"

"I don't wanna either! Talking to him drives me crazy!"

Most of the angry yelling was coming from Cam himself. Hajime and the others listened in silence. As unbelievable as it seemed, the ones doing the torturing were taking more mental damage than the one being tortured. The three of them looked at each other, nonplussed.

"Do we even need to save him?"

"Should we go home?"

"Sorry, I know he's like that but please save him. I don't think

he'll be able to escape on his own..."

Shea looked off into the distance, reminiscing about the kind man her father used to be. She was right of course. Cam wouldn't be able to escape on his own, so they did need to save him.

"Hmph, pathetic. It seems you're no match for me, Cambantis Elfalight Rodelia Haulia, hunter of the unknowable abyss!"

But the way he was talking made it rather hard to sympathize with his plight.

"Shea. Your dad's sure turned into something special alright."

"Mmm... His name's too long to remember."

"Ugh. Does he have a grudge against me or something? It's like he's trying to kill me with embarrassment."

Shea covered her face with her hand and crouched down in shame. She'd been hit pretty hard by that. It seemed Cam's torturers were just as shocked by his outburst as his daughter was.

"What the hell are you talking about!? Fuck, forget this! I can't stand staying in the same room as this madman! I'm going home!"

"Wait, Johan! You can't just abandon your post! And don't say things like that, you'll jinx us!"

Hajime heard the sound of footsteps approach the door. *I guess I really overdid it with those guys.* Hajime lamented to himself as he balled his hand into a fist. The moment the door flew open, he swung his fist. The poor man known as Johan opened his eyes in surprise as he saw a fist fly toward his face. A second later, Hajime's metal knuckles buried themselves in Johan's face, and he was sent flying across the room.

Hajime then rushed into the room and knocked out the other shocked torturer with another well-placed punch. He carelessly kicked the two unconscious men to an empty corner of the room and turned to Cam.

"Impossible... Boss... is that really you?"

"Yeah. You know, I'm actually kinda impressed you were able to yell at them so much considering how beat up you are. You've become strong, in more ways than one..."

Hajime decided not to address the issue of Cam's crazy nickname.

"Hahaha. So this really isn't a dream... Ohh, you brought Yue-dono and Shea with you as well."

Cam quickly realized this wasn't a dream, and chuckled heartily. Despite his near-fatal wounds, he still had the energy to laugh.

It seemed they hadn't dulled his mind or his senses with drugs, seeing as he able to accurately analyze the situation.

"My apologies for showing you such a shameful sight during our long-awaited reunion. I can't believe I was so engrossed in insulting those spineless maggots that I didn't even notice your presence..."

Forgive me for bringing dishonor to your name.”

“Dad... I really don’t think that’s what you should be worrying about right now. We need to heal those wounds of yours. Especially that nasty brain wound you’ve taken... And how are you still so energetic after being beaten up so much?”

“Fighting spirit?”

“Hajime’s reeducation program... is terrifying...”

Freed from his restraints, Cam awkwardly scratched his head with broken fingers. He didn’t even seem to notice they were pointing the wrong way. His response to Shea didn’t do much to boost her confidence in his mental state either.

Yue looked at Hajime with a truly frightened expression as she healed Cam’s wounds with restoration magic. *You know, what’s really scary about this isn’t me, but the combination of Sgt. Hartman’s training program combined with chuuni spirit...* Once Yue finished healing Cam, he hopped up and down a few times to check out the condition of his body. Seeing that he was just fine, Hajime once again took out his Gate Key.

“I already got the others out of here. So we’ve got no reason to stay.”

“But Boss, they still have all of our equipment...”

“Hm? Eh, don’t worry about it. I made a bunch of better stuff while practicing my transmutation. You guys can have some of those.”

“You’re going to gift us with new equipment? Now that I’m looking forward to. Kukuku.”

Fed up with his attitude Shea pushed her father through the portal with an exasperated sigh. Hajime and Yue followed close behind.

Let us turn back time to a few minutes before Hajime began infiltrating the castle.

The capital’s alarm bells suddenly rang through the night, and a massive pillar of light shot up from the center of the city. It sliced through the darkness, cutting across the slave district where most of the beastmen were kept, and smashed right into the slavers’ guardhouse. The light’s caster had held back, which was why the guardhouse hadn’t been obliterated, and only the outer walls had crumbled. In fact, the soldiers inside hadn’t even been hit directly by it. Most of them had still been knocked unconscious by the shockwaves, however.

The remaining soldiers looked toward the source of the light, and spotted four masked figures standing atop a nearby building’s roof.

“Who are you guys!? Don’t think you can attack imperial soldiers and get away with it!”

One of the soldiers let out a yell and charged forward.

“And... what on earth is with those ridiculous masks!? Is this you’re idea of a prank!?”

“Huh? No, wait we’re not...”

“You’re sorely underestimating us, you brats!? That pink mask has to be some kind of joke!”

“!?”

“You think you look cute in that or something!? I’ll have you know that mask looks creepy as hell! You damn pervert!”

“!? I-I’m not trying to look cute. I don’t even like this mask that much... I was just forced to wear it... It’s not my fault...”

“Hey, stop insulting Shizu... I mean, Ranger Pink’s mask, you ugly old man! Or else you’ll have to deal with me, Ranger Yellow!”

“That’s right! There’s nothing wrong with Shizu...I mean Ranger Pink liking cute things! If you insult her any further, I, Ranger Red, will never forgive you!”

“Yeah~ Ranger Blue won’t forgive you either~”

Ranger Pink slumped her shoulders, dejected. Her comrades stepped forward to defend her.

Their mission was ostensibly to create a diversion so that Hajime would have an easier time sneaking in, but Shizuku knew the real reason he’d asked them to do this. It was so that Kouki wouldn’t go on a rampage and bumble things up. She understood that, but the whole masks bit really was going too far. Shizuku swore to get her revenge on Hajime once this was over.

In the time that they’d been talking, more imperial soldiers had gathered. Now that they had enough men, the lead soldier yelled “Capture those weird masked freaks!” Unfortunately, the empire was up against a bunch of overpowered kids who’d conquered the outer part of the Great Orcus Labyrinth. Kouki and the others started taking down the soldiers in waves.

“Goddammit! Those masked bastards are tough!”

“Damn you, Ranger Pink!”

“Is it just me, or does the sword Ranger Red’s using look familiar?”

The soldiers cursed as they were incapacitated by the students’ attacks. Three squads had already been downed. Unable to take it anymore, the commander shouted.

“Fuck, what are you weirdos after!?”

At that, Ranger Red suddenly stiffened. Then, as if he was hurling all of his pent up resentment at the soldiers, he yelled.

“I demand that you release all of your beastmen slaves! At the very least, treat them better than dirt!”

“...What?”

“I can’t stand how awfully you treat those poor beastmen! Stop

your tyranny this instant!”

The imperial soldiers hadn't been expecting such a strange request. It was understandable, though. After all, to the empire that kind of treatment was normal. So they didn't understand what was so cruel about it.

“Ngh. What's with that attitude... You're the ones making them suffer!”

“Hey... Ranger Red. Sorry to burst your bubble, but in this world, it's our perspective that's strange. Don't forget, our main goal is just to create a diversion.”

“I know that! But maybe we could at least free the kids...”

“There's too many of them. Or are you saying we should pick and choose who to save? Either way, it's about time he should be going in. It hurts me too to leave them like this, but for now let's focus on the task at hand, alright?”

“...Fine.”

Even through his mask, his reluctance was noticeable. Ranger Pink nodded in satisfaction and rapped the side of her mask with her knuckles. Hajime had told her to do so if the empire asked them what their objective was, or if they began to suspect that they were fighting against the hero's party. Letters made of mana floated up inside Shizuku's mask. She flinched back in surprise, and watched as the first message disappeared, only to be replaced by another set of letters. These, she reflexively read aloud.

“Listen well, soldiers of the empire. Our goal is to ascertain the current state of the capital. We may have failed to assassinate your emperor, but it's clear your city still suffered a heavy blow!”

The soldiers looked up in surprise. Shizuku's comrades also looked at her in surprise.

“Wait, don't tell me you bastards are demons!? I get it now, so you came to see how badly you hit us, huh!?”

“We are the most elite of the demon lord's soldiers. The Masked Rangers!”

Ranger Pink sounded a little hysterical as she screamed that. She then signaled to her comrades to strike a pose with her. Her forceful attitude shocked them into compliance. *I guess rumors are going to spread that there's an elite demon unit that runs around wearing strange masks now.* Ranger Pink mentally apologized to the demons she was impersonating. It was almost impressive how Hajime planned on pinning every disturbance he could on the demons. Doing so also had the added benefit of making Kouki's outbursts about freeing the slaves sound like something the demons wanted. Obviously that might cause trouble for the demons in the future, but that wasn't something Ranger Pink had to worry about. It wasn't her problem, after all.

"You better stop treating your slaves like trash. Or else..."

"O-Or else what?"

The soldiers' commander asked timidly. Ranger Pink stepped forward and answered.

"Or else, when you're in the bath at night, when you're woken up suddenly from your dreams, when you're walking down a deserted hallway, underneath your desk, behind your curtains, inside your armor, even in your dreams... you'll start to see masks."

Though she spoke in a monotone, her voice had an ominous tinge to it. The soldiers all gulped. It sounded ridiculous, but also terrifying. There was something horrifying about seeing weird masks everywhere.

Their mission now complete, the figure leaped off the rooftop and vanished into a side alley. The soldiers hurriedly chased after them, but by the time they reached the alley, they had disappeared into the night.

As time passed, the legend of Ranger Pink turned into a bedtime story parents told their children to scare them into obedience. When Shizuku found out, she wondered why it was only her that everyone remembered, but that was a tale for another time.

The simultaneous disappearance of the Haulia along with the appearance of a strange masked group became the talk of the town for weeks to come. It also left the capital in a state of confusion for a good day.

When Hajime, Yue, and Shea returned with Cam, they were greeted by enthusiastic cheers from the rest of the Haulia. The rabbitmen playfully slapped each other on the backs, playfully punched each other in the stomachs, playfully hit each other with right hooks, and playfully insulted each other.

"*Sniffle* Thank goodness. Even if they're still a little violent, I'm so glad everyone's safe. Hajime-san, Yue-san, thank you so much."

Tears welled up in Shea's eyes. Her wish to see her family safe had finally been granted.

"Mmm... It's good that we made it in time."

Yue stood up on tiptoe and patted Shea on the head. The tears started flowing. Shea clung to Yue like a little girl.

"Well, a lot of stuff happened that I wasn't expecting, but it turned out alright in the end. Looks like I won't have to wipe the empire off the map after all."

Hajime stroked Shea's bunny ears while casually dropping that statement. A second later, Hajime heard the sound of rushing wind. He raised a hand and grabbed the black sheath that had been swung down at his head.

“What was that for, Yaegashi?”

The owner of the weapon was of course, Shizuku Yaegashi.

Though Hajime was only holding the sheath between his fingers, Shizuku couldn't pull it out no matter how hard she tried. She clicked her tongue and mustered all of her strength.

“I thought I'd blow off my stress by knocking you senseless. Don't worry, I have faith in your kind heart Nagumo-kun. I know you're generosity runs deeper than the Mariana Trench... So kindly let me beat you to a pulp!”

“Do you really hate pink that much? And here I thought you'd like it.”

“Liar! I know exactly what you were after! You just wanted to make us look like fools! I can't believe I let myself go along with this! I guess that does make it partially my fault, but still! You deserve at least one good smack for this! Now take your lumps like a man!”

“Don't be ridiculous...”

Looks like that traumatized her more than I thought. But it was also true that she could have refused the mask if she really hadn't wanted to play the part. So she was right that it was partly her fault for letting her go along with the flow. However, that didn't stop Hajime's prank from being in bad taste. Nor did it stop her from being mad at him for putting her through it.

Unfortunately for Shizuku, there was a huge difference in strength between the two of them. Even at full strength, she couldn't get past his fingers.

With no other choices left, Shizuku decided to use her katana's special ability. She was only willing to go so far because she believed it wouldn't do too much damage to someone as overpowered as him.

“You little! Roar— Thunder Blossom!”

“Oh? Heh.”

Bolts of lightning crackled down the length of Shizuku's sheath, but Hajime didn't seem pained by them at all. In fact, he just seemed impressed. Shocked, Shizuku said, “Hey, Nagumo-kun. How come you don't look bothered at all by all that electricity?”

“Well I mean, how many times have you seen me fire my railgun now? I've been shooting electricity through my body for ages, you didn't really think that little spark would hurt me did you? Though I've gotta say, I'm impressed you managed to make the sword's skills activate.”

“Tch. Fine... I'll back off for now. But you better watch out. I'll get you for this someday, mark my words. And I got help from the kingdom's Synergists to make the sword usable.”

Shizuku reluctantly took her sword back and belted it again. Behind her, Kouki and the others watched in awe. They hadn't

expected anyone to try and seriously challenge Hajime. Kaori gave Shizuku a troubled smile, while Yue glared coldly at her. In a small voice, Kaori said, "I've never seen Shizuku-chan... get this mad before."

"I thought she'd be angrier."

For some reason, Tio also nodded in agreement.

"Boss, do you have a minute?"

It appeared the Haulia were done with their reunion scuffling. Judging by Cam's serious expression, Hajime guessed that whatever this was, it was important. Hajime transmuted a circle of chairs for everyone to sit in, lowered himself into one, and nodded to Cam.

"I suppose first I should explain how this happened. Put simply, we were overconfident. Basically, it went down like this..."

In summary, Cam's tale was this: Back in the sea of trees, Cam's unit had been able to annihilate a significant chunk of the empire's rearguard as they retreated from Verbergen.

The testimonies of the few soldiers who survived, combined with the fact that many of the empire's units didn't regroup with the main army made it clear to the top brass that Verbergen had a new unit of soldiers who were a cut above the rest. Because of that, the empire had strengthened their guard.

Verbergen had already suffered one attack from the demon army. There was no telling what they might do. The army's commanders thought it wise to throw away their preconceptions that beastmen would never leave the forest, and maintained a vigilant watch in case an army came to take back the captured slaves.

So when Cam and the others arrived at the capital, they found that the slaves Hoelscher had taken from Verbergen had been gathered all in one place, instead of put to work. By the time the Haulia realized it was a trap, it was too late.

Cam and the others had no choice but to attempt a retreat after the empire's dense surveillance net spotted them.

For their part, the empire was quite surprised too. The unknown squad they'd discovered had been made up of rabbitmen, of all people. The same gentle, peace-loving rabbitmen that were used mostly as sex slaves by the empire. Moreover, these rabbitmen were able extremely well-coordinated, and were more than a match for the empire's elite troops. Naturally, this piqued the curiosity of the empire's top brass.

As a result— "They captured us alive and interrogated us day after day. Most of their questions were about who it was that had transformed us like this, and where we'd gotten our equipment from. Also they wanted to know what Verbergen's long-term plans were. I think they mistook us for some elite combat unit trained by

Verbergen... Even though they nearly executed my entire family and exiled us from the city. Bet they would have never guessed that.”

Cam and the others had in fact told their captors multiple times that they were no friend of Verbergen, but the soldiers had just thought they were sacrificing themselves for the sake of their country. The Haulia’s denial only solidified the empire’s convictions.

Gahard in particular had been enamored with Cam and the others. His eyes had sparkled like a child with a new toy when he’d seen how strong-willed his prisoners were.

“And? I’m sure you didn’t want to just make excuses for why you got captured. What is it you wanna say?”

“My apologies, Boss. Moving on to the main topic, our family has grown since we inducted new rabbitmen into the Haulia clan. I was thinking of taking our new and improved Haulia army— and going to war with the empire.”

Time ground to a halt. Cam’s declaration had left everyone stunned. Well, everyone but Hajime and the other Haulia. The others weren’t able to comprehend what he’d just said, or perhaps they were just so shocked they didn’t know what to think. The chirping of crickets was the only noise that that could be heard.

Finally, Shea broke the silence.

“What-What did you just say, Dad? Did I hear you right? It sounded like you said you were going to go to war with the empire...”

“You heard correctly, Shea. As I said, I plan on waging war against the Hoelscher Empire.”

Shea tried her best to keep her cool, but Cam’s confirmation caused the color to drain from her face.

“D-Don’t be ridiculous! What are you thinking!? I know you’ve gotten a lot stronger Dad, but you’ve only got 100 people with you! You’re going to fight the empire with just that!? Have you lost your mind!? Did seeing your comrades get captured make you so mad you can’t think straight!?”

“I’m not doing this for revenge, Shea. And I’m perfectly sane. Just listen to—”

“Nothing you say is going to convince these bunny ears! If you’re not after revenge, then are you just way too overconfident!? If you really think you can win, take out your sword. You’ll have to beat me before I let you take on the empire! I’ll knock some sense into you!”

Shea took Drucken out of her Treasure Trove and whirled it around her head. From her perspective, challenging the empire was suicide. And the fact that Cam was driving her family to their deaths made her furious.

Pale blue mana swirled around her, and the pressure coming off of her was palpable. She was so intimidating that even Kouki and the

others gulped and took a few steps back.

Usually, Shea was a cheerful girl who never seriously got angry. Which made her real wrath all the more terrifying. However, Cam didn't back down at all. Even with Shea's hammer thrust in front of his face, he continued staring calmly at his daughter.

The two of them glared, or perhaps just stared at each other for a few seconds before Hajime finally decided to butt in.

Before anyone knew it, he'd gotten behind Shea and started fondling her fluffy tail.

"Hyaaaah!? What are you doing!? Aah, stop, not my tail! Hajime-shan, shtooop!"

The strength drained from Shea's limbs as Hajime continued groping her. She fell to her knees, panting, and glared reproachfully up at him. She didn't mind being touched by him, but there was a time and place for everything, and this wasn't the time nor the place.

In response, Hajime grinned and started stroking her ears. Unlike before, his hand motions were more gentle than erotic.

At first Shea had been mad at Hajime for interrupting her during a serious conversation, but as he kept stroking her ears she started to relax.

"Have you calmed down a little? Cam hasn't even finished talking yet. You can at least wait until he's explained his plan before beating him down, right?"

"Ugh... you're right... Sorry. I let my emotions get the better of me. I'm fine now. Sorry, Dad."

Shea's bunny ears drooped in apology. Cam smiled and shook his head.

"There's nothing wrong with worrying about your family. You have nothing to apologize for. I'm sorry too, I should have chosen my words better. I've spent so much time yelling at people I forgot how to talk like a normal person... Hehehe, though I've gotta say..."

"Wh-What? Why're you laughing like that, Dad?"

"I'm just glad you seem happy. You've gotten a lot closer to Boss in the time since we last met, I see. The way he looks at you now is totally different from when you first left. Does this mean I'll be getting grandkids soon?"

"Wha— G-Grandkids!? What are you saying, Dad!? I-It's still too early for..." Shea blushed and looked bashfully up at Hajime. All of the other Haulia watched with grins on their faces.

These guys sure have gotten cheeky... Hajime thought absently to himself. He completely ignored Shea's glances and asked Cam,

"Cam, surely you didn't tell me all this because you wanna to ask for my help, did you?"

"Haha, perish the thought. It's just, I was only able to make this

decision because you taught us how to fight back, Boss. So I thought it was only right that I tell you.”

Cam smiled. It appeared he really did mean to invade the empire with just the Haulia. Their resolve was the real deal, too. They hadn’t been driven crazy by thoughts of revenge, or overestimated their abilities just because they’d won a few fights. However, whether they were resolved or not, it was still reckless. Cam must have had a very good reason for choosing this path.

“What’s your reason for going to war?”

“Now that’s a surprise, you actually care? I thought it wouldn’t matter to you...”

“If you found your resolve because of what I taught you, then the reason you’re being so reckless is technically my fault. If that was all, I still wouldn’t care, but...”

Hajime glanced over at Shea. She was clearly still worried about her family. Her bunny ears were still drooping.

Cam smiled and nodded in understanding.

“I see. Well, as I said before, us rabbitmen have now caught the emperor’s eye. He’s very interested in what we’re capable of. Everyone in the empire, the emperor included, believes might makes right. They believe that the weak should submit to the strong. It’s permeated every part of their society.”

“So what you’re trying to say is that even if you escape, he’s going to start hunting rabbitmen? Not to kill, but to make his slaves?”

“Correct. When we were being tortured, the emperor came to me personally and said he’d be willing to get us out of here if we became his slaves. Of course, I just spit in his face, but...”

“Good going, chief!” the other Haulia shouted in encouragement. Kouki, on the other hand, was stunned. “He spit in Gahard’s face!?” His surprise was understandable. Cam was probably the first to person, beastman or not, to have ever spit in the emperor’s face.

Even Hajime nodded in appreciation.

“Unfortunately, that only made him like us even more. He said something really arrogant about how it’d be interesting if he caught all the rabbitmen in Haltina and trained them the same way we were trained. The problem was, I could tell from his face that he was serious. There’s no doubt that he’ll invade Haltina again and capture as many rabbitmen as he can.”

Worse, this time they wouldn’t be used as sex slaves, but as soldiers.

Cam sighed.

“Verbergen’s still reeling from the last two attacks. It won’t survive a third. So, if the emperor demands they hand over all the rabbitmen in their territory in exchange for not being invaded...”

“I see. If you stay on the defensive, you’ll run out of options. All of your brethren will end up as slaves.”

“Correct. If all I wished for was to protect the Haulia, escaping the empire’s clutches would be a simple task. But I refuse to sit idly by as other rabbitmen are robbed off their future... because of us, no less.” Cam was in a far more desperate situation than Hajime had thought.

As Cam had said, if all they wished was to protect themselves, they could easily hide out in the sea of trees and wage a guerrilla warfare campaign indefinitely. But doing so would mean consigning all other rabbitmen to a fate worse than death. If they refused to become soldiers for the emperor, the women and children would be sold off as pets while the men would all be killed.

“But you don’t honestly think you can take on the empire with just a hundred men, do you?”

“Of course not. A head-on battle would see us defeated in seconds. But we’re rabbitmen. We’re better at sneaking about than any other race.”

Cam grinned triumphantly. Realizing their intentions, Hajime replied.

“You’re gonna assassinate them?”

“Correct. We’ll show the empire there’s consequences for baring their fangs at us. Whenever they’re alone, whenever they’re not on their guard, they’ll suddenly find a blade at their throats... By doing that, hopefully they’ll start to fear us. They’ll realize that we can be anywhere, anytime, and kill them in over 400 different ways. They’ll learn that we’re not weaker or lesser than them, and that making an enemy out of us was the worst mistake of their lives.”

“Do you think emperor hasn’t taken any precautions against assassins or something?”

“Of course not. But our goal won’t be the emperor himself. Just the people close to him. Even if he can protect himself at all times, there’s not enough guards to protect all of the empire’s officials.”

“Cam, you didn’t tell me all this because you wanna ask for my help, did you?”

“This is the best we can hope to do with our current strength, but I think it’ll work well enough. As long as we can get the empire to leave us alone, we’ll have succeeded.”

What an underhanded plan. Hajime thought to himself. Still, it was a lot more realistic than attempting to assassinate the emperor or his family. However, a plan like this needed time to take effect. There was no guarantee the empire wouldn’t attempt some kind of counteroffensive in that time.

It was entirely possible that the empire would start rounding up all killing all rabbitmen in retaliation before the Haulia had done

enough damage to force the empire to the negotiating table. Cam's plan was a huge gamble. One with pretty low odds, at that.

But they had to try, or there was no future for the rabbitmen. The other Haulia had steeled themselves as well.

"Dad... Guys..."

Shea slumped her shoulders. Now that Cam and the others had escaped, she knew that the emperor now had a political reason to go after the rabbitmen along with a personal one.

The only options left to the Haulia were either to escape and consign every other rabbitman to slavery, submit to the empire, or bet their lives on one final clash.

"Shea, don't make that face. Before, all we did was run in fear, have our rights trampled over, and tell ourselves we had no choice but to accept it. But now we have the ability and the opportunity to fight back. Nothing could make us happier."

"But—"

"Shea, this fight isn't just about living. We need to win in order to earn our right to exist. So that we can hold our heads high and proudly call ourselves Haulia. No matter how strong we get, if we run away here we're no different from the weaklings we used to be. And that is one thing I will never accept."

"Dad..."

"You have to keep looking forward, Shea. You can't waste time worrying about us. You made your decision, remember? You resolved to go with the boss, wherever that might take you. Don't forget that determination, and keep moving forward."

Cam spoke not as the leader of his tribe, nor as the general of his army, but as a father who cared about his daughter. He didn't want his daughter to get stuck together with him, unable to move forward with the people she wanted to.

Shea hung her head, tears pooling in the corner of her eyes. Cam watched over her for a few seconds longer before turning back to Hajime. His gaze seemed to be saying *Take care of her for me*.

Kouki stood up, probably intending to announce his desire to help if Hajime wouldn't, but Shizuku smacked him on the back of his head with her katana, and sat back down. Probably because of all the recent stress, Shizuku's handling of Kouki was rougher than usual.

For his part, Hajime remained silent. Shea turned back to him, most likely in order to ask for his help again. But before she could open her mouth, Cam cut her off.

"Shea!"

Shea jumped and turned back to him. Cam had no desire to beg Hajime for help. It was his own fault that he'd fallen for the enemy's trap, and partly his own fault that he'd brought Gahard's attention

onto them. If he relied on Hajime's strength to solve this problem for him, it would be no different than before.

Like he'd said before, this was a fight to prove to the world that rabbitmen had just as much a right to exist as anyone else.

Shea knew that as well. She knew as well as they did how painful it was to always be running away. And right now, she cherished her pride as one of Hajime and Yue's comrades. But she couldn't help but worry knowing just how much of a long shot their plan was.

In the end, Shea fell silent, unsure of what to say. Hajime sighed, scratched his head, and shot Yue a questioning glance. As always, Yue didn't need words to know what he was thinking. Her expression softened, and she nodded in agreement.

Hajime gave her a small smile and turned back to Shea.

"Shea."

"Hajime-san..."

A faint glimmer of hope flared up in Shea's eyes.

"I won't participate in this fight."

"Uuu... I... understand."

However, Hajime's words brought her back to the well of tears.

Kouki stood up to protest again, but Shizuku jabbed in the side and jolted him with an electric current strong enough to knock him unconscious. Meanwhile, Hajime smiled playfully and squished Shea's soft cheeks.

"Hold on, don't jump to the wrong conclusions. I just said I'm not participating in the fight, not that I won't help."

"Huh?" Shea looked up at him in confusion.

Sensing Hajime's intentions, Cam and Haulia exchanged troubled glances.

"The Haulia need to show off their strength here, or this fight'll be meaningless. They need to show the empire that if you mess with them, you'll get burned. If I fight with them, it won't change anything. That'll just tell the empire they can start going after beastmen again once I'm gone. It won't do anything about the deep-seated prejudices humans hold against beastmen. But more than anything, Cam wants to win this fight with his own strength, so I won't interfere." Hajime then turned to Cam.

"But if our cute mascot makes that kind of face, there's no way I'm just gonna shut up and do nothing."

"B-But then, Boss... What are you suggesting?"

In the face of Cam's confusion, Hajime smiled fearlessly.

"Cam. No, all of you Haulia. There's no way I'm letting you use a plan so shitty it made Shea cry. If you're doing this, your blades are reaching the emperor. Grab him by the hair, beat him down, and show all of his relatives, friends, and subordinates that they're no

match for you. Conquer the capital in just one night, and show those imperial bastards they're done for! Teach them that nowhere's safe from the Haulia's blades! That no matter where they hide, your ears will find them! That anyone who makes themselves an enemy of the Haulia will mean a painful end! Carve your names into the history of the empire!"

Silence followed after Hajime's speech. Everyone had been overwhelmed by his fervor. The sounds of everyone gulping echoed through the night. Then, Hajime glared at everyone for a few seconds before sucking in a huge breath.

"Where's your reply, you worthless maggots!?" He boomed in a voice louder than thunder.

"H-Huh!? S-Sir, yes, sir!"

"I can't hear you! You call that a battle cry!? Is this how you've been fighting all this time, you goddamn wimps!?"

"Sir, no sir!"

"Well then prove it to me, you bastards! Prove you're fighters, and not maggots!"

"Hoooah! Hooooah! Hooooaaah!"

"Behead anyone who stands in your way with blades of pure will!"

"Behead! Behead! Behead!"

"You bastards are gonna be the main star of this fight! You better not fuck up the opportunity I'm making for you, you hear that!?"

"Aye, aye, sir!"

"Alright, then let's see some fighting spirit! You 120 new and improved Haulia are..."

"....."

"Going to capture the imperial capital!"

"Yahaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

Though Cam and the others had no idea what kind of opportunity Hajime was referring to, anyone with common sense would thought it impossible to capture the capital, and in one night no less.

But the Haulia were too fired up by Hajime's speech to worry about that. Their beloved boss was saying he'd personally open the door to victory for them.

If they couldn't at least clear the obstacles beyond that door, then they didn't deserve to call themselves Haulia. If they failed here, they would bring eternal shame onto their boss' name.

Thus, the Haulia steeled their resolve and prepared to topple the imperial capital. Their uproarious war cries echoed through the starry night.

"Uh, Shizushizu, those guys are starting to scare me."

"It's okay, Suzu. I'm scared too... Though, I'm more scared of what

Hajime's planning than the rabbitmen."

"That Nagumo... Hehe, I never thought he'd be one of Sgt. Hartman's pupils too. Who knew you were a real man after all."

"Ryutarou!? Don't tell me you approve of all this!? This is totally crazy!"

Shizuku and the others watched in dumbfounded amazement as the Haulia hyped themselves up. Except Ryutarou, who respected Hajime's choice of role model for a drill sergeant.

"Mmm, I must say, that is quite impressive. Transforming the peaceful rabbitmen into warriors is no mean feat. I suppose I should expect no less from Master. And to think he intends to rout the empire in a single night. I'm getting excited now... Though I wish he would insult me with such vigor."

"Shut up, you perverted dragon."

"Huh!? Haaah, haaah..."

"Could you please tone it down, Tio-san? More importantly, do you see Shea's expression, Yue? She looks so happy. That smile is so cute even my heart skipped a beat."

"...Yeah. After all, Hajime's doing this so Shea won't cry... It's natural she'd be happy."

"I know, right. It must feel so nice~ I hope Hajime-kun does something like that for me someday."

With the exception of the resident pervert, Yue and the others were captivated by Shea's beaming smile. Yue had known things would turn out like this from the start, but her lips still curled up into a faint smile as she saw Shea's cheerful expression. Kaori, too, smiled in relief. Though she couldn't keep a slight twinge of jealousy out of her tone.

After the cheering was over, Hajime got to work hammering out the details of his plan. Once they were done finalizing it, everyone went to rest before the decisive battle. Throughout the night, Shea stuck to Hajime like glue. She wasn't as bubbly as usual, but nor was she depressed. Rather, she seemed oddly bashful, and kept blushing every time she nuzzled against Hajime. Even in her sleep, her bunny ears kept brushing against Hajime over and over. As if she wanted to make sure he was still there next to her.

Two figures sat on a rocky outcrop in the predawn light. Hajime and Yue. They had woken earlier than usual. The sun was only just beginning to crest the eastern horizon.

Technically, it was only Hajime who was sitting on the rock. Yue was sitting in Hajime's lap. The only other people awake right now were the Haulia on watch. However, the boulder Hajime had picked was in the sentries' blind spot, so the two of them were able to spend

some time together for the first time in a while.

They sat together in amicable silence as they watched the sun rise.

Suddenly, Yue took her head off Hajime's shoulder and kissed the nape of his neck. The wet sound of her kiss broke the silence.

"Where'd that come from?"

"Mmm... I just felt like it, after remembering what happened last night."

She was of course referring to Hajime's declaration that they'd topple the capital.

What that had to do with her kissing him, though, even Hajime didn't know. He locked eyes with Yue and tilted his head questioningly.

"You put Shea's feelings over your mission. I'm happy that you care about her that much. And that there's more things you hold dear now. I'm so happy that I..." As she spoke, Yue kissed him again.

Ah, I get it now.

"Does this mean Shea's special to you now, too?"

"Well, not exactly. She's definitely one of the people I care most about in the world, but... you're the only one who's special, Yue."

"Mrr... Even though I'd be okay with Shea. But I'm also happy."

Yue looked up at Hajime, both troubled and happy. Shea was the first friend Yue made after climbing out of the abyss, and she treated Shea like her little sister. To Yue, Shea was just as special as Hajime, just for different reasons.

That was why she was willing to let Shea be someone "special" to Hajime, a title she wouldn't relinquish to anyone else. And so, while she was happy at Hajime's words, she did also wish he'd stop being so stubborn.

For his part, Hajime found Yue's insistence that he grow his harem annoying. It irked him that she actually wanted him to consider other people just as special. He decided to get his revenge by showering her in kisses until she could no longer think about anyone else.

"Mmm... Mmm... Haumf... Haji... Mmm..."

As the sun started to rise, their shadows grew. Because of how close together they were, it looked like they were a single shadow, except during the times they separated to draw breath.

After a few minutes, Yue's cheeks were flushed, her lips were glossy with saliva, and her eyes were filled with longing.



Just as they were about to take the next step, Hajime heard someone calling for him from behind the boulder he was sitting on.

“Oooi, Nagumo. You here?”

It appeared Kouki wanted him for something. He must have gone looking when he’d seen Hajime wasn’t in his sleeping bag. The sun had risen completely now, and it was around the time everyone else would be waking up.

“Tch, of course he’d be the one to interrupt us. I wanted to let him learn some ancient magic so we’d have help when there’s a dozen Noints coming after us, but... it’s starting to feel like more trouble than it’s worth.”

Grumbling, Hajime attempted to stand. However, Yue wasn’t going to let that happen.

“I won’t let you escape, Hajime. Mmph.”

“Hey wa— Mmmph.”

She pushed him back down and cut off his protests with a kiss. Hajime fell backwards onto the boulder, but he didn’t go down without a fight. Even as Yue was straddling him, he attempted to kiss her back.

“Kouki, did you find Nagumo-kun?”

“Well, I thought I sensed someone over here, but—!?”

Shizuku, Suzu, and Ryutarou walked up behind Kouki.

Halfway through answering Shizuku’s question, Kouki stopped. The sight he’d been presented with upon rounding the boulder had shocked him into silence. Confused as to why he was just standing there, Shizuku and the others walked up to him and peeked around the boulder as well. When they spotted Hajime and Yue, they too went stiff.

Just then, Shea, Kaori, and Tio arrived as well. Upon seeing Kouki and the others just standing there, they went over to see for themselves just what was so shocking.

“Heeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeey! What do you think you’re doing, flirting first thing in the morning!?”

“Mmm, want to join in, Shea?”

“Wait, I can? In that case...”

“Absolutely not! And Yue, get away from Hajime-kun this instant! You’re making me jealous— I mean, this isn’t right!”

“Hmph, if Shea is allowed, then I should be too, no? All I ask is that you punish my arse...”

After seeing the chaos unfolding around him, Hajime reluctantly lifted Yue off him and stood up.

He calmed Shea, who was about to jump him at Yue’s suggestion, with a sharp jab to the stomach, comforted Kaori, who was crying

tears of envy, and appeased Tio by smacking her on the ass as she wanted. Kouki and the others couldn't bear to keep watching, and beat a hasty retreat.

Suzu had completely broken down and had been repeating "So this is what an adult's like..." over and over, so Shizuku had to carry her out. Even though Shizuku's face had been just as red as Suzu's.

That morning marked the beginning of the Haulia's counterattack. It was such a sloppy start that it left everyone, even the people involved, dumbfounded.

Chapter III: The Princess' Ordeal

Let us turn back the clock to a few days earlier, when Liliana and her guards had been dropped off near the capital. After leaving Fernir, they rode carriages she had brought along for the journey.

As she'd outpaced all of the messengers and diplomats she'd sent ahead, Liliana doubted the empire knew she was coming. That made her feel somewhat apologetic for all the uproar her sudden arrival would cause, but right now there was no time to waste.

At the very least, she'd sent her royal guards ahead of her to give the imperial castle some advance warning of her visit. That would have to be enough.

"The city appears to be on high alert, Your Highness." One of her maids, Helina, said that as she poked her head out the carriage window.

Eventually, Liliana made a pained frown and replied.

"It must be because of the recent demon attack. I've heard as much from the Haulia, but it appears the raid really did take a toll."

"And to think, this wasn't even their main army. Thank goodness that boy showed up to protect us. Without him, I doubt our capital would have survived."

"Indeed..."

"If you could just convince him to stay with the kingdom, our country's future would be secure..."

"I suppose so..."

For some reason, Helina was staring very intently at Liliana.

"If you could just convince him to stay, our country would be secure."

"Why do you keep repeating that line!? And why are you looking at me like that!?"

Helina looked Liliana up and down, as if appraising her. Then, with a hopeless sigh, she spoke once more.

"If you could do that, he would become our new king..."

"Like I said, why do you have to keep... Wait, what did you just say? And what exactly was that sigh for, pray tell? What exactly about my body disappointed you so!?"

Helina had been one of Liliana's maids since childhood. For years, Helina had supported her princess from the shadows. And Liliana considered Helina to be one of her few friends that she could truly

open up to. Though Helina's tendency to casually insult her friends wasn't so commendable.

In the time that Liliana was grilling her maid, the carriage arrived at the castle gates. The pair were shown to their room without incident, and were told that Gahard would hold an audience in the evening.

That evening, Liliana made her way to the audience chamber. When she stepped inside, she found Gahard waiting with a smile on his face.

Gahard D Hoelscher, emperor of the Hoelscher Empire, was in his late fifties, but looked like a man ten years younger, and possessed the vitality and energy of a man twenty years below him. His lustrous silver-gray hair, sharp gaze, and bulging muscles made it clear that he hadn't let old age get the better of him just yet. It had only been half a year since Gahard had snuck into the kingdom to test Kouki's strength, so it stood to reason that he hadn't changed much since.

Liliana had thought that since the demons had invaded the capital he might have been injured, but he seemed completely unscathed.

"Well met, Princess Liliana. Considering your rather sudden visit, I expect you have something interesting to report."

"I hope that Your Majesty finds it so..." Liliana prefaced, before explaining the details of the invasion of her kingdom.

She started from the very beginning, when Eri had started turning the royal soldiers into undead. She also explained what the true Apostles of God were, and the secret machinations that Ehit had been scheming all along. Liliana finished by describing the destruction of the Holy Church, Eri's betrayal, and the death of her father, King Eliheid.

Gahard had sat in silence, taking in the entire tale, and when Liliana finished he heaved a long sigh. Then, he leaned back in his chair and covered his face with one hand.

Though Gahard had never been a very devout follower of Ehit, the revelations still shook him to the core. Liliana had experienced much the same herself, so she quietly sipped her tea and waited for him to sort out his feelings.

"I see... So Eliheid, Loggins, and even that wily old geezer who I thought was immortal... died." His voice was controlled, devoid of emotion. And yet, there was a sadness in his gaze.

After a while, he straightened his back and met Liliana's gaze.

"That is quite a troubling turn of events. It grieves me to learn that a wonderful king and one of the best soldiers the world has ever seen are now dead. Thank you for bringing me this information, Princess Liliana."

"I simply did my duty. Besides, it appears you've suffered quite a

bit yourself." Liliana was surprised by Gahard's unexpected sympathy. She had thought he was a far colder man.

"But still... I see, so the Holy Church, and Ehit... If this information were to become public, there would be an uproar."

"And yet you yourself don't seem too shocked by this revelation, Your Majesty."

"Oh, I'm plenty shocked. The god I believed in since I was a little brat turned out to be a madman. But well, you know how it is with the empire. All we really believe in is strength. Killing our enemies and taking what we want is all that matters to us. The weak exist to serve the strong. So if it turns out Ehit's a sham, well, it's his own damn fault for getting found out. Now that I know the truth, there's no point in worshipping a false god."

"I-I see..."

The empire's devotion to strength was unshakable. After all, they even decided who had the right to be the next emperor through a series of duels. *But still, I can't believe he considers his philosophy to be applicable even to god... The people of Hoelscher are... Insane*, Liliana thought to herself with a frown.

Gahard didn't seem the least bit perturbed, and he swiftly changed topics.

"However, I must say. The explanation you came up with was rather well-thought. You expertly deflected... no *used*, the citizens' shock to your advantage. Were you the one who came up with the idea?"

"Well, I suppose I was the one who finalized it at least."

Gahard narrowed his eyes at Liliana's vague response.

"Which means... someone else was the brains behind it?"

"It wasn't me, no."

"This is going nowhere. Quit beating around the bush already. The empire absolutely must know who it is that came up with such a shrewd plan. If you insist that it was you, Princess Liliana, then I will have no choice but to make you my own. After all, anyone who can come up with such a nasty excuse is sure to catch my eye."

"Very well, as you suspect, this plan was suggested by someone else." Liliana sold Hajime out without hesitation. Or rather, she'd gotten permission beforehand to tell Gahard about him. After all, if she was going to explain the truth of the gods and the demons to him, she would inevitably have had to explain his involvement as well.

Though, she would have preferred to keep his existence a secret, if possible. Most because she was worried that the emperor, who valued strength above all, would become obsessed with him. She wasn't worried that Gahard might actually manage to capture Hajime. No, she was worried that Hajime might wipe the empire, her only ally, off the map if Gahard was too persistent in chasing Hajime.

But they should be deep within the sea of trees by now. Even His Majesty won't be able to find them there. That was the main reason Liliana had decided to talk.

After hearing about Hajime's existence and achievements, Gahard held out a hand and stopped her speech.

"Wait a moment, Princess."

"Of course. Take your time. I can guess what you must be thinking."

Gahard rubbed his temples and tried to absorb what Liliana had just told him.

"I'd like to believe this is all just a joke, but..."

"Everything I said is true. He is a most abnormal Synergist, one capable of single-handedly destroying an army a hundred thousand strong, and creating artifacts that can travel the distance between our capitals in a day and a half." Liliana smiled, a weary expression on her face.

Wrinkles appeared on Gahard's forehead as he digested her words.

"This is on a scale far beyond anything I've ever seen. If what you said really is true, he's a strategic force all on his own. If he felt like it, Hajime Nagumo could wage war on a nation all on his own. He's nothing like that immature hero I fought before. That kid was strong, but nowhere near that level. We can't just let him run wild. What kind of person is he?" Gahard was worried that Hajime might have been making ridiculous demands of Liliana, as repayment for saving their city.

However, Liliana smiled and shook her head.

"Don't worry, he's not what you think. He's not evil, but I wouldn't quite say he's good either. He just has no interest in the affairs of this world. Basically, his stance is one of non-intervention. He won't give up his artifacts to anyone, either. However, if it's for the sake of the people important to him, or for his goals, he won't hesitate to do anything, no matter how crazy. He's like a porcupine, only dangerous if you poke him."

Liliana's frustration at the way he treated her leaked out a little in her explanation. Gahard smiled wryly and stroked his chin.

"So what you're saying is I shouldn't get involved with him. As the head of the state, you know I can't do that."

If possible, Gahard wanted to bring Hajime into his fold. Ideally, he wanted to be able to utilize Hajime's powers as he wished. As the emperor of Hoelscher, it was only natural he would think that.

"That being said, if he truly can traverse the skies in a flying artifact, even meeting him would be difficult. For now, I'll be content to wait and see. In the meantime, I must get my hands on ancient magic, the source of Hajime Nagumo and the demons' power."

“That is all well and good, but know that if you attempt anything, we will not sit idly by. Though we are allies, he is our kingdom’s savior.”

“Hmph, big words.” Gahard snorted.

While it had been a boon to discover what the reward for clearing a labyrinth was, the emperor was well aware that clearing one himself was most likely impossible. The most practical solution was still to solicit someone who already possessed ancient magic. But that, too, wouldn’t be easy. It was a vexing situation for Gahard.

“Now then, I’m sure you didn’t come here just to tell me that. Let me hear what you propose regarding our alliance.”

“Of course. To be frank, I came here to request your assistance in rebuilding the kingdom and to renew our alliance.”

Liliana passed over the documents detailing her plans for their joint battlefield against the demons. The main thing Liliana wanted from Gahard was for him to send over military aid.

After Eri’s betrayal, the kingdom had lost their strongest knight, Meld Loggins, along with the core of their elite forces. In order to fill the hole those soldiers had left, Liliana wanted to borrow the strength of the empire’s best.

“I see. I would be willing to part with one division of troops. It is in the empire’s best interests to keep the kingdom safe as well. The last thing I want is to fight a war on two fronts.”

“Thank you for your generosity.”

Liliana breathed a sigh of relief. The thing she’d wanted the most had been granted without any conditions.

The two of them hashed out the details of Hoelscher’s support, then moved to discussing their overall policy for dealing with the demons.

Naturally the two of them couldn’t make sweeping policy decisions on their own, so they mostly discussed high-level strategy and outlined the steps they would be taking.

“That about wraps it up, I believe. All that remains is to show the rest of the world the strength of our alliance. I am afraid I will have to ask for your cooperation, Princess Liliana.”

“I understand. If you wish to seal our alliance with a marriage, I would be willing to set up an engagement. However...”

“I understand your situation, of course. At present, you cannot leave the kingdom in anyone else’s hands. Prince Lundel has yet to be officially crowned, correct? And I believe you mentioned many of your most competent ministers were killed in the attack? I do hope you’re not working yourself to death.”

Liliana nodded with a wan smile. In the end, it was decided that she would be engaged to the imperial prince, and their engagement

would be announced publicly within the next few days. After that, Liliana would head home with the platoon of soldiers Gahard would lend her.

The marriage itself wouldn't take place until the situation in the kingdom settled down. However, once it did, it would show both their own citizens and the demon army that the two countries were steadfast allies.

Overall, Liliana was pleased with how the discussion had gone, so she tried to pretend she didn't notice the sting of disappointment she felt at having to get married.

Two nights later, messengers delivered a most unusual report to Liliana and Gahard.

"And that concludes my report, Your Majesty!"

"Very well, you are dismissed."

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

Gahard stared at the door the messenger walked out of for a few seconds before shooting a questioning glance at Liliana, who was maintaining a poker face.

She gave him a troubled smile and said nothing more than "That sounds troubling." Her expression made it seem like she was concerned as the ruler of a neighboring nation, but was refraining from meddling directly in the affairs of another sovereign state. Gahard was impressed by how little it gave away.

"What an unbelievably ridiculous state of affairs. First we were invaded by an impossibly powerful demon army, and now a bunch of crackpots in masks attacked in the middle of the night...? What are your thoughts on the matter, Princess Liliana?"

"I am afraid I understand no more than you. The messenger said they claimed to be an elite unit of the demon army, but..."

"Indeed. I suppose that possibility exists. Though I doubt any demon would be caught dead in a mask like that, it wouldn't do to dismiss the possibility entirely. Even if one of the masked warriors happened to wield light magic and an artifact wreathed in holy light..."

"Oh my, that does sound rather terrifying."

"Curious indeed. When my soldiers asked him what his motivations were, he claimed that he wished for us to free our slaves. Rather incomprehensible, wouldn't you say? I cannot imagine any inhabitant of this world wishing for such a thing. Quite mysterious, is it not?"

"That it is, Your Majesty." Liliana's smile didn't even crack under the pressure of Gahard's searching gaze. What was even more impressive was that it wasn't just a static expression, but a dynamic

smile that changed to match the needs of the situation. This was a skill that all royalty needed if they wished to survive in the world of politics. Unfortunately, while her poker face was perfect, Gahard noticed that her breathing had grown slightly erratic.

“Princess Liliana.”

“Yes?”

“The kingdom’s hero should currently be on his way to the sea of trees together with Hajime Nagumo, should he not?”

“That is correct.”

“I see, I see. By the way, did you know I recently captured a very interesting group of beastmen?”

“Hm?” Liliana, who’d been breaking out in a cold sweat, blinked at the sudden change in topic. Gahard, however, ignored her surprise and continued.

“They were a very, and I mean very, unique group of rabbitmen.”

“.....” Liliana felt like she’d just been punched in the gut. Still, she kept her mask of a smile up all the way through. In a way, she had become the fifth ranger of the group.

“They were more than a match for my imperial troops even outside the forest. I never imagined rabbitmen could display such ferocity.”

“My, I know that rabbitmen are known for being peaceful, but I guess that means some of their clans aren’t. How frightening...”

“That’s not all. Their equipment was made of the highest quality ore, the kinds of materials you can only find in the Great Orcus Labyrinth.”

“It seems Verbergen’s technology is far more advanced than we thought, wouldn’t you say?”

“Assuming, of course, it was Verbergen’s craftsmen who made those weapons. The only person I can think of who would be capable of mass producing such sharp swords is the abnormal Synergist you mentioned earlier.”

“.....” Liliana’s heart couldn’t take much more. She needed Helina’s special tea to calm her down. *Once this meeting’s over, I’ll ask her to brew me some*, she thought firmly to herself.

Just then, there was another knock on the door.

“Enter.”

“Pardon the interruption, Your Majesty. But I have an urgent report!”

“No need to stand on formality, tell me what happened. Has the masked group returned?”

“N-No, Your Majesty. The thing is... All of the Haulia have escaped their cells!”

“.....” Gahard turned to Liliana. This time, his expression was

grim. His cold gaze bored into her, but even still, Liliana's smile didn't waver. Though internally, she was panicking.

He's here! He's definitely here! No one else could free an entire group of people from the empire's prison without anyone noticing! But how come Kouki-san and the others are here too!? And what even was the point of the masks!? If he wanted to hide his identity, he shouldn't have used his holy sword!

Gahard questioned Liliana in a flat voice.

"By the way, Princess Liliana."

"Yes, Your Majesty?"

"Hajime Nagumo has a group of extremely powerful comrades with him, does he not? And isn't one of those a rabbitman?"

"Indeed." Liliana tilted her head, as if to ask "What does that have to do with this?"

She masterfully morphed her smile into a look of mild confusion. It was amazing how natural she made it look.

There was a reason Liliana had been hailed as one of the most talented princesses in history. When it came to diplomacy and communication, she had no blind spots. On the outside, at least.

Holy crap, he totally knows! He doesn't suspect me of being an accomplice, does he? God, why is this happening to me? I've never seen the emperor look at anyone like that! This is all Nagumo-san's fault! I bet he was the one who put Kouki and the others up to that ridiculous stunt with the masks, too... He probably just wanted to make fun of them! I can't believe he did this all just as a prank! Knowing him, he probably knew how much trouble it would cause me and still did it anyway! Ugh, why does that man always treat me like an afterthought!? It really hurts, I swear! I'm the princess!

None of those thoughts showed on her face though, so Gahard had no way of knowing she was secretly cursing Hajime.

The next day, Gahard was planning on making Liliana's engagement to the imperial prince public, so she was busy preparing for the coming upcoming ball where he would make the announcement. As she was picking out her dress, someone knocked on her door.

"Princess Liliana, there is someone asking for you at the front gate..." One of Liliana's maids relayed the message she'd received from the soldiers down below.

Liliana tilted her head. She hadn't been expecting any guests.

"Who is it?"

"Uh, well... He claims to be the hero."

"Why's he just marching through the front gate!?"

Liliana screamed, making her maid jump at the sudden outburst.

However, Liliana no longer had enough composure to act calm. Gahard had already seen through Kouki's ruse, but he'd just waltzed up to the gate and asked to see her. Liliana was certain Hajime had been the one to put him up to everything.

"Bring him up immediately! Take him straight to my parlor! Don't let him meet with anyone else! Please," Liliana begged, grabbing her maid by the shoulders and shaking her back and forth.

"Y-Yes, Your Highness!" The maid ran out in tears, terrified by her mistress' bloodshot eyes.

"Helinaaa! We need to see Kouki-san before he has a chance to talk to Emperor Gahard! Help me get ready!"

"Leave it to me!" Helina gathered the other maids, then quickly set them to work.

Liliana scurried about as well, trying to get ready as soon as possible before Kouki messed something else up.

Hoelscher's imperial castle was a symbol of the empire's might. It sat right in the middle of the capital, surrounded by a twenty-meter deep moat, and sturdy walls enhanced by multiple layers of magical barriers.

Aquatic monsters roamed the moat's depths, and the ramparts were constantly patrolled. The only way into the castle was through the massive drawbridge leading to the front gate.

The number of people allowed into the castle was relatively small, and all of them were required to present magical identification cards to prove they were allowed access. There was a French-style arch in front of the bridge, with guardrooms built into the sides. Any visitors first had to pass the inspection there before the guards would even lower the drawbridge.

If anyone was suspected of attempting to sneak in illegally, they would be thrown into the monster-infested moat right then and there. The inspectors at the arch had no mercy whatsoever. Even traders who had been granted access cards had their goods inspected thoroughly before being allowed to reach the gate. Naturally, this meant sneaking in among a bundle of a merchant's wares was impossible.

In short, this meant that sneaking into the imperial castle was nigh impossible. All of this ran through Kouki's mind as he waited for his turn to be questioned. He nervously looked back at the people who'd come with him. His childhood friends Shizuku and Ryutarou, Suzu, and of course Hajime's group.

Hajime had returned to the capital because he'd determined that boldly waltzing through the front gate was the best course of action. As he saw just how strict and thorough the inspections were, Kouki started thinking.

Even if we were out there creating a diversion, I'm amazed Nagumo was able to get the Haulia out of THAT without anyone noticing.

Of course, since they were able to use spatial magic, Hajime would have had no trouble getting everyone out. But even sneaking in past all of these guards couldn't have been easy.

While Hajime had asked about the location of the imperial dungeons, unless he'd had a perfectly accurate mental image of their location, he wouldn't have been able to teleport inside it. And if he'd tried to infiltrate through the front, someone would have questioned him. Kouki couldn't fathom how Hajime had done it, but he had to admit it was an impressive feat all the same.

Once again, Kouki was reminded of the huge difference in strength between the two of them. He sighed forlornly.

Incidentally, the only people Kouki had been able to draw were the units stationed in the city, so his diversion hadn't actually done anything to lessen the castle's security. At best, he'd made some of the wall guards curious as to what was going on.

"Next... Haven't seen you around before. Show me your pass." The gate guard glared suspiciously at Kouki.

As the number of people allowed into the castle was small, the gate guards recognized most of them. Even if someone new did arrive, they were usually people of stature, and their clothes and entourage tended to reflect that. It was rare for someone unknown and also dressed in adventurer's clothes like Kouki to approach the castle gates. Rare enough for the gate guards to become suspicious, in fact.

"I don't have a pass, but I think this should be able to prove who I am..."

"Hm? A Status Plate? What's this for?"

Naturally, no one in Hajime's party actually possessed the magical identification pass required to enter the castle. However, Kouki's title came in handy at times like these. After all, he was humanity's hero. The leader of the apostles Ehit had sent to lead them in the war against the demons.

The gate guard dubiously took Kouki's status plate and looked it over. His eyes stopped on the job field, which said "Hero." He blinked in surprise a few times, then looked from the Status Plate to Kouki, then back to the Status Plate. His colleagues came over as well, wondering what had their comrade so shocked.

"So then you're really... the hero... sir? The same one who was summoned to the kingdom by Ehit?"

"Ah, yes, that's me. I'm the hero. I accompanied Princess Liliana partway to the capital... and now, because of certain circumstances, I have returned."

"I-I see..." Upon learning Kouki's true identity, the gate guards

started murmuring hurriedly to each other.

“Why did he leave the princess halfway through her journey?”

“And why didn’t he tell anyone he was coming now?” Their confusion was understandable.

However, they were dealing with a member of god’s chosen flock. They couldn’t pry too deeply, or it would be seen as a slight to the Holy Church. And so, they concluded to themselves that he must be on some sort of secret mission, and decided to let their superiors figure out whether or not to let Kouki in.

Terrified of making humanity’s hero wait too long at the front gate, a few of the guards dashed into the castle and started looking for someone with authority. In the meantime, Hajime and the others were let into a waiting room while things got sorted out.

They were only waiting for 15 minutes before someone came back.

Kouki and the others had gotten so used to Hajime’s harem’s antics that they hadn’t even said anything when Yue sat on one of Hajime’s knees while Shea, Kaori, and Tio wrestled with each other to determine who got to sit on the other. In fact, they had gotten so used to it that they didn’t even bat an eyelid when the force of Shea, Kaori, and Tio’s struggle made the drawbridge creak.

“I’ve heard the hero party is here to visit the castle... Would that be you?”

“Ah, yes, that’s us.”

A burly soldier walked into the waiting room. Judging from the respect the other soldiers gave him, he was clearly someone of considerably high rank.

He brusquely looked Kouki up and down, checked over his Status Plate, then turned his suspicious gaze onto everyone else. When he spotted Shea, who was hiding in a corner of the room, his eyes went wide with surprise. Second later, a lascivious grin spread across his face.

Shea squirmed slightly under his creepy gaze.

“Very well. I am captain of the imperial guard’s third squad, Grid Half. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I have already informed Princess Liliana of your visit. She will receive you in her quarters. I will have one of my subordinates take you there. By the way, who is that rabbitman with you? That choker around her neck doesn’t appear to be a slave collar.”

“Oh, uh, she’s...”

Grid Half nonchalantly nodded toward Shea as he returned Kouki’s Status Plate.

Kouki stuttered, at a loss for how to respond. Shea’s ostentatious choker couldn’t be considered a slave collar by any stretch of the

imagination; it looked more like the kind of gift a husband would give his wife. To be honest, even Kouki wasn't exactly sure what Shea was.

Seeing as Kouki wasn't going to say anything, Grid turned to Shea instead. His tone left no doubt as to why he was interested in her.

"Hey, little bunny. What did you do to my men?"

"Your men? Why would I— Wait..."

Grid's sudden question caught Shea off-guard, but then a second later she realized what he was insinuating and her eyes shot open.

Shea hadn't met too many imperial soldiers. The only ones she knew were the ones who'd chased her and her family down when she'd first ran to Hajime for help. The same soldiers who'd killed, kidnapped, and enslaved her family, and herded those who remained deep into the Reisen Gorge.

"Don't you think it's strange? None of my men ever came back, but here you are, alive and well. Why the hell are you still alive, huh!?"

"Uwaaah..."

Grid leaned over and brought his face close to Shea's. By some strange twist of fate, Shea had run into the commander of the unit that had initially chased her family into Reisen.

As Grid had been the commander, he hadn't participated in the battles himself, which was why Shea hadn't recognized him. However, because of how rare Shea's hair color was, Grid remembered her vividly.

Flashbacks of her friends and family being hunted down one by one floated to the surface of her mind. The thoughts made her let out an involuntary groan as she scuttled backward, but then a steady hand pinched her cheek, and she returned to her senses.

She looked over and saw Hajime standing right next to her. Then, she felt another warm pinch and turned to see Yue beside her.

She didn't look worried. In fact, she looked rather reproachful. Her eyes seemed to be saying "If you can still let a weakling like him get to you, you need more training."

Shea gave her a weak smile in response. While that experience may have been traumatic, she now had the mettle to take on Labyrinths' greatest monsters and come out on top. There was no reason for her to fear a measly imperial general.

Her fear gone, Shea nodded to Hajime and Yue, then turned back to Grid and smiled sweetly. She stood her ground, and finally responded to his question.

"I don't know what happened to your men, and I don't care. Those worthless morons probably got themselves eaten by a monster or something. Also, I have no obligation to tell you anything!"

"Don't get ahead of yourself now, girl. You better not think you'll

get off lightly because you're with the hero's party! If you're not a slave, you probably weaseled your way into their group by selling your body! Don't think any of these guys'll stand up to protect you!"

However, Shea was already ignoring Grid. She'd said what she needed to, and now he wasn't worth any more of his time.

All Grid's yelling did was make the other girls mad at him. Realizing that this wasn't the time to kick up a fuss, Grid grit his teeth in frustration, but did nothing more. He quickly forced a smile and turned back to Kouki.

"My apologies, Sir Hero, but this bunny girl might know something about my subordinates who went missing two months ago. Would you mind handing her over to us? If you need another bunny girl to satisfy your needs, I can of course—"

"Listen, trash." Hajime interrupted Grid before he could finish. Grid's cheeks reddened in rage and he rounded on Hajime.

"What do you—"

"Shut up, trash. Your job here is done. I don't give a damn about your men, so quit wasting our time with your useless prattle. Hurry up and take us to the princess."

"You little—"

"Do you not understand the meaning of shut up? I don't have any time to waste on useless pieces of shit like you. Learn your place, scum."

Hajime's haughty attitude left Grid fuming. Eyes bloodshot, Grid barely restrained himself from attacking the entire hero party then and there. Instead, he jerked his head toward one of his men, indicating for him to guide everyone to Liliana's rooms.

Hajime ignored Grid's furious glare, and followed his guide out of the waiting room.

While his treatment of Grid had left Ryutarou and Kouki a little intimidated, the girls seemed to have appreciated it. Hajime himself hadn't actually tried to be mean, he'd just actually meant what he said. Had Grid known that, he probably would have popped a blood vessel.

However, if he had actually gone off on Hajime he would likely have had his balls crushed, so in a way he should have been thankful for his self-control, really.

Hajime and the others ignored Grid's glares and followed the pale-faced guide across the drawbridge.

"Well?" That was the first thing Liliana said upon seeing Hajime and the others. Though she was smiling, it was a rather terrifying expression. It was obvious she was angry at Hajime, and wanted an explanation.

The last few days had left her extremely stressful. While it could be said she was only baring her feeling so openly because she was close to Shizuku and Kaori, that didn't make them any less terrified of her wrath.

"First you cause an uproar in the capital, and now you come back the next day!? What on earth are you doing!? You better have a good explanation for this. I won't let this matter drop until you've convinced me. You hear me, Nagumo-san!? I know you're the one behind this, so don't you dare try and change the subject! Don't just sit there rubbing Shea-san's bunny ears while pretending you've got nothing to do with this either! And Yue-san, I know you had to be part of this too, so don't bother trying to run!"

Liliana glared at Hajime. At that point she'd come to understand that when anything ludicrous occurred, ten times out of ten Hajime was the one behind it. As far as theories went, it was a pretty accurate one.

In response, Hajime just sat there, with Shea instead of Yue on his lap for once. He was rubbing her bunny ears, while Yue sat on his other knee and played with Shea's cheeks.

"Hm? Did you say something?" Since entering the castle, Hajime had been too busy fondling Shea to pay much attention to his surroundings.

For once, he actually hadn't heard Liliana and was not just pretending.

In tears, Liliana screamed.

"I'm the princess, the least you could do is listen to me!" She repeated her earlier words in a shrill voice.

"Why're you so loud, Princess? I'm sitting across from you, so you don't have to shout."

"I'm shouting because you didn't listen to me when I was just talking!"

"C-Calm down, Lily! Help me out here, Shizuku-chan. Her fury is piercing the heavens! I've never seen her this mad before!"

"I'm pretty sure Nagumo-kun's the only person who's managed to make the princess mad. Anyway, calm down, Lily. We'll explain everything, don't worry."

Kaori and Shizuku attempted to soothe Liliana. Unfortunately, Hajime's next words didn't help the matter.

"Anyway, can't you just forgive us for this, Princess? We had a lot to deal with. And Shea's still a little shaken, so..."

"She is? What happened to her?" As always, Liliana was kind to a fault. She looked on worriedly at Shea, who was still being toyed around with by Hajime and Yue. At first, she had still looked a little stressed, but thanks to her best friends' ministrations, she was feeling

a lot better. Shea looked up at Liliana and gave her a reassuring smile.

Though Yue and Hajime's support had helped her get over it, the meeting with Grid had still been rather traumatic.

However, the reason for her current stress wasn't because he'd terrified her. Quite the opposite, in fact. It had taken everything she'd had to keep herself from ripping him to shreds then and there. After all, Grid was responsible for the death of so many of her friends and family. Once she'd overcome her trauma, all that had remained was an overpowering hatred.

Still, because killing him there would have ruined their plan, she was forced to hold herself back. It had taken every ounce of her willpower, and both Hajime and Yue realized that. So once they'd left, the two of them had started coddling Shea to calm her down.

Hajime briefly explained the relationship between Shea and Grid to the others. Once he was done, Kouki and the others rose up in anger, while Liliana looked down sadly into her lap.

Liliana was part of the society that had normalized the slavery of beastmen, so she felt as if she didn't have the right to be angry on Shea's behalf. Though now that she'd learned the truth, her bias against them was rapidly fading. She had been told as a child that beastmen were pathetic creatures who Ehit had abandoned, but if Ehit himself was mankind's enemy, it seemed rather silly to still hate beastmen on that basis. That was true for all others who'd discovered the truth as well.

Still, just because they no longer discriminated against beastmen didn't mean that their history of persecuting them had been wiped away. Liliana knew she had no right to criticize others, so she just gave Shea a small nod of solidarity and turned back to Hajime.

"I understand that, but why are you here? What happened to conquering the labyrinth in the sea of trees? And why on earth did you cause that ruckus with the masks last night? I'm sure Gahard will ask to see us soon, so we need to have our stories straight ahead of time. It took a lot of effort to meet you before he asked to see all of us, so the least you can do is explain the situation."

"Now now, there's no need to rush, Princess. You'll understand everything by tonight. As for why we're here... Well, let's just tell the emperor that we finished conquering the labyrinth faster than expected and dropped by here before we head out again."

"Th-That's not nearly a good enough excuse... And wait, if you say I'll understand by tonight, does that mean you're planning on donning masks and rampaging across the city again? I know you, Nagumo-kun! You're the one who made Shizuku and them wear those embarrassing masks, right!?"

"Don't get so worked up, you'll go bald."

“I will not! How could you say such a thing to a girl!”

“...Baldy Princess.”

“Yue-san!?”

Liliana looked down, crestfallen. It was clear Hajime had no intention of explaining his plans to her. Meanwhile, Shizuku was gloomily muttering “embarrassing masks...” over and over to herself.

“Leaving the mask incident aside, last night a group of people escaped from the imperial dungeons. Nagumo-san, you were also the one behind—”

“Why do you keep accusing me of things... You’re one mean princess, you know that?”

“I don’t want to hear that from you. Sure, I don’t know all the details, but the captured rabbitmen were part of the Haulia clan, were they not? You must have saved them for Shea-san’s sake. That much makes sense, but you coming back certainly does not. What are you planning?” Liliana’s tone made it clear that she was willing to help, if necessary.

Though she was only 14, she was the head of a nation. There was a lot of pressure on her from numerous factions. Despite that, she was willing to do anything to help Hajime’s cause. Even Yue couldn’t help but smile. Naturally, everyone else was also moved by her kindness.

Liliana had been like this from the beginning. Even when all the other people of the kingdom were putting the students on a pedestal and calling them god’s chosen, only Liliana had realized that they’d been dragged into this world’s fight, and had done everything in her power to support them.

Seeing her serious gaze, Hajime smiled and responded.

“I don’t get what you’re saying.”

“What’s that supposed to mean!?” Liliana flared up again, looking just about ready to slap Hajime in the face.

Once again, Kaori and Shizuku pinned her arms and tried to calm her down.

No matter how many times Liliana tried to ask after that, Hajime would just continue to play dumb. And since Hajime wasn’t saying anything, all the others decided it was best to stay quiet too. Finally, Liliana just gave up and looked out her window like a broken doll. “Whatever will happen, will happen,” she murmured to herself.

The reason Hajime didn’t explain anything was because it would have been too much of a pain, and the reason no one else said anything was because they understood the situation. Kaori and the others were still trying to cheer Liliana up when a messenger came to announce that the emperor had requested their presence. Hajime and the others followed the messenger back to the audience hall where Gahard was waiting.

In the center of the wide hall sat a long, rectangular table large enough to seat thirty people. Like the rest of the room, it was unornamented. Gahard lounged at the head of the table, his chin in his hands and a triumphant grin on his face. Behind him stood two elite warriors. It was obvious these were his most skilled and disciplined soldiers. Those weren't the only bodyguards he had protecting him, either. Though they'd hidden themselves well, Hajime could sense the two soldiers hiding inside the walls, the four in the ceiling, and the two that had just taken up positions outside the room's closed doors. The ambushers weren't as strong as the soldiers directly behind Gahard, but they were still powerful.

Gahard had them completely surrounded, it seemed.

"Are you Hajime Nagumo?"

Gahard ignored Kouki, who was ostensibly humanity's hero, and went straight to questioning Hajime. His sharp gaze seemed to pierce right through him. Gahard was ready for a fight to break out at any time.

The intensity he exuded made it clear that he hadn't risen to the top of a nation that valued strength above all by mistake. He was emperor of a nation that encompassed hundreds of thousands of people, and he had the strength to back that claim up.

Kouki and the others took an involuntary step backward and readied their weapons, while Liliana let out a terrified squeal.

However, Hajime, Yue, Shea, Tio, and Kaori seemed unaffected by the heavy pressure Gahard was emitting. Even Kaori, who had far less experience than the others, had faced much worse within the Sunken Ruins of Melusine. Compared to fighting against immortal soldiers from eons past, the intimidation attempts of a mere emperor were nothing.

Excited by their lack of reaction, Gahard's grin grew even wider. He waited eagerly for Hajime's response.

"Yeah, I'm Hajime Nagumo. It's an honor to meet you, Your Majesty."

"Huh!?"

Hajime placed a hand over his breast and bowed. Kouki's jaw dropped open in surprise, Ryutarou pinched his cheek to make sure he wasn't dreaming, Suzu cowered behind Shizuku, while Shizuku herself feared Hajime might be coming over with something.

"Kaori, please! You need to heal Nagumo-kun before it's too late!"

"Huh? Sh-Shizuku-chan?"

Liliana was even more stunned than the others. *Who is this and what have they done with Nagumo-san!?* After the treatment she had received at his hands, she couldn't fathom Hajime being nice to royalty.

“What the hell’s with those looks, guys?” Hajime’s eyebrow twitched. Even he knew there was a time and place to act polite. Most of the time he just didn’t care enough to do so. It just so happened that right now, he couldn’t afford to get kicked out of the capital. In which case, angering the emperor would not be a wise move. That was why he had shown a basic level of courtesy.

However, he hadn’t expected his comrades to be so shocked. Well, everyone but Yue, who’d seen through his intentions already. Gahard chuckled and joked playfully.

“Kuku... So this is the man capable of coming up with a story to deceive the masses. You can create any facade you please for yourself, can’t you? However, I would prefer you talk as you usually do. I have already heard tales of your arrogance from Princess Liliana. Even if that were not the case, the esteemed hero’s reaction tells me all I need to know. If you treat me any nicer than you do the princess, you’ll make her cry, you know?”

Hajime glared accusingly at Liliana. *Now why’d you go and tell him that?* Liliana harrumphed and turned her head.

“I’m interested in the real you, not some made-up persona, so enough of the unseemly antics.”

“Haaah, if you say so. In that case, I’ll just talk normally.”

“Good.” Gahard waved toward the nearby chairs, and everyone took a seat. Once they were seated, Gahard took his eyes off Hajime and began inspecting Yue and the others. He seemed particularly interested in Shea.

Next, he swept his gaze across the students. He ignored Kouki completely, but gave Shizuku, who was sitting next to him, a roguish grin.

“Long time no see, Shizuku. Have you finally decided to become my wife?”

“Your Majesty, I believe Shizuku already refused that proposal!” Before Shizuku could say anything, Kouki jumped to defend her.

Gahard spared Kouki a glance, scoffed at him, then turned back to Shizuku. The message was clear: Kouki wasn’t even worth Gahard’s time. Kouki fumed at being treated so dismissively.

Shizuku sighed, then replied.

“I have no intention of changing my mind. My apologies, Your Majesty, but I must refuse your offer.”

“How cold. Still, that’s what makes you a worthy prize. I’ll prove to you that staying with me would be far more interesting than going home to your world. I look forward to the day that composed expression of yours crumbles and you come begging to my bed.”

“I’m afraid such a day won’t ever come. Besides, don’t you already have a wife, Your Majesty?”

“Your point? Or do you mean to tell me you’re unsatisfied with being my concubine? Hmm, unfortunately, taking you as my legal wife would be difficult...”

“That’s not what I mean! How can you continue chasing after women even though you’re already married?”

“Whatever do you mean? I’m the emperor. It’s only natural for me to have a couple dozen concubines.”

“Ngh... I see. A-At any rate, I’m afraid I cannot become your concubine. Please give up, Your Majesty.”

“Well, seeing as you won’t be receiving any help from Ehit, I’m sure you’ll be stuck in this world for a while longer at least. I’ll just have to take my time seducing you. Kuku, prepare yourself, Shizuku.”

Gahard was well and truly infatuated with Shizuku. An greedy man like him wasn’t one to take no for an answer. He wouldn’t stop until Shizuku was his.

Shizuku was looking at him like he was a disgusting lecher, but he didn’t even seem to mind. She pointedly turned away from him, and ended up locking eyes with Hajime.

He was lacking his usual intensity, and it seemed almost like he was spacing out, but it was clear he was still listening to the conversation. When their eyes met, Hajime smirked at Shizuku. His gaze seemed to be saying “Must be hard, being everyone’s nanny.”

Annoyed, Shizuku reached over to the tea set and flicked a sugar cube at him. Though she lacked Hajime’s might, her abilities still weren’t to be underestimated. The sugar cube flew toward Hajime’s face with considerable force.

However, Hajime wasn’t going to let it hit him. He opened his mouth and caught it with his teeth. And then, he chewed on it slowly, savoring the sweetness, before swallowing in an exaggerated fashion. Once he was done, he returned to looking disinterestedly at a corner of the wall.

Gahard hadn’t missed that little exchange, and he turned his sharp gaze back onto Hajime. He looked the young man up and down, appraising him.

“Hmph, what a tedious meeting. Hajime Nagumo, there are a mountain of questions I have for you, but there’s something I need to know before that.”

“Yeah? What is it?”

“Have you already slept with my Shizuku?”

“Bwuh!?”

Shizuku, Kouki, Ryutarou, and Suzu all choked on their tea. Not only had that question been completely unexpected, Gahard had said it with a straight face. Even Gahard’s guards shook their heads and muttered, “Your Majesty... is that really so important?” It seemed, just

like Shizuku, Gahard's men had their own problem child to deal with. Flustered, Shizuku screamed.

"Your Majesty! What kind of question is that!?"

"Quiet, Shizuku. I'm asking Hajime Nagumo, not you."

Gahard held out a hand to silence Shizuku. Seeing as he wasn't going to budge, Hajime sighed and responded.

"What insane thought process led you to that deduction?"

"Well, it appears to me that Shizuku is willing to relax around you... I didn't think you had, but I just wanted to make sure."

"Haaah... Of course I haven't."

"Hmm, that doesn't seem to be a lie. In that case, what do you think of Shizuku?"

At that, everyone in the room turned to Hajime. Kouki's expression turned grim, while Ryutarou and Suzu appeared nervous. Yue, Shea, Tio, and Kaori all had an eclectic mix of expressions as well.

Why the hell is the emperor grilling me on my relationship with Shizuku? With a sigh, Hajime turned to Shizuku.

Her face had contorted into a bizarre grimace. He tilted his head and observed her for a few seconds. As he watched, the tips of Shizuku's ears started to turn red. Eventually, Hajime said something quite shocking.

"She reminds me of my mom."

"Okay, now you're asking for it, Nagumo-kun. Outside. Now."

Young, vivacious, 17-year-old Shizuku rose to her feet. This time for sure, she would make Hajime pay for calling her a mom. There were no traces of the faint blush from earlier.

Ryutarou and Suzu, who'd been worried about this exact thing happening, rushed to stop her.

"A truly unexpected answer... but no matter. Shizuku, don't let yourself fall for him. You're mine, after all."

"I am not yours, Your Majesty, nor do I have the slightest romantic interest in Nagumo-kun! Now can we please change the topic!?"

"Fine, as you wish. No need to get so worked up. If you deny it so strongly, it'll just make people suspect the opposite."

"Grr..." Shizuku growled, but then obediently sat back down.

Suzu gave her a strained smile and tried to placate her while Kouki glared angrily at Hajime.

"Hajime Nagumo. You better not lay a hand on Shizuku either."

"Don't worry, I'm not the least bit interested in her. Can we cut the crap and get to the point already? I wanna go back to my room."

"You wound me. And this is a very important discussion, you know? It concerns a future concubine of the emperor, which in turn

could influence the empire's future... Well, no matter. It's true I didn't ask you here to talk about Shizuku. As I'm sure you can guess, I want to know about those abnormal powers of yours."

Gahard had been able to get a good measure of Hajime by seeing how he reacted to the topic of Shizuku, but now it was time to get down to business. His joking attitude vanished, replaced by the sharp stare he'd had when Hajime and the others had first arrived. He kept his eyes on Hajime as he explained the reason behind calling them here.

"I've heard some things from Princess Liliana already. You were able to conquer one of the Great Labyrinths and used the power you gained there to create a set of unique artifacts... after which you annihilated a demon army and traversed a distance that should take two months to cross in just two days. Is that all true?"

"Yeah."

"And is it also true that you have no intention of granting the empire or the kingdom any of these artifacts?"

"Yeah."

"Hmph. Do you truly believe... we would allow you to monopolize such power?"

"Allow me? Even if you didn't allow it, what could you do to stop me?"

Gahard narrowed his eyes dangerously. He, along with the guards standing behind him, shifted into fighting postures. Hajime also sensed the soldiers lying in ambush attempt to mask their presence even further. A battle could have broken out at any minute.

"E-Emperor Gahard, what are you thinking!?" Liliana was as white as a sheet. Even though she'd warned him earlier not to provoke Hajime, he'd gone and "kicked the dragon's arse," so to speak.

However, Gahard didn't bother to reply. Instead, he kept his gaze focused squarely on Hajime. Kouki and the others tensed up as well, ready for anything.

Meanwhile, Hajime ignored the heavy pressure coming off of Gahard and continued sipping his tea. He looked up at the ceiling and over to the walls, as if to tell Gahard he knew where all the other guards were. Shaken, Gahard sat back in his seat.

"Hahaha, it's my loss, I suppose. Can't believe you saw through that. You really are one hell of a monster. I can tell if we fought you here you'd slaughter us all."

With a hearty laugh, Gahard relaxed his muscles. At the same time, all of his men lowered their weapons. He hadn't planned on actually doing anything, but as emperor it had been his duty to see just how strong Hajime was. After seeing him with his own eyes, Gahard was convinced.

Confused, Hajime asked,

“Why do you look so happy?”

“Come now, I’m the leader of the empire! What kind of emperor wouldn’t jump for joy after seeing someone so strong?”

As someone who respected strength more than anything, such a reaction was to be expected. Kouki and the others breathed a sigh of relief and slumped back in their chairs. Meanwhile, Liliana sat back and rubbed her stomach. All that stress had given her an ulcer.

“And it’s not just you. Those girls you’ve got with you are all insanely strong too. Hey, where’d you find them? If there’s girls who are so strong out there, I’ve been chasing after the wrong women... Mind giving at least one of them to me, Hajime Nagumo?”

“Say that again and I’ll crack your skull open... Actually, wait, you can have Tio.”

“Wh-What!? M-Master, did you just sell me off to another man again!? Haaah, haaah, such a cruel punishment is... wonderful! Haaah... Haaah!”

“She’s got a few problems, but at least she looks pretty.”

“Sorry, but even an emperor has his limits. That drooling pervert is too much for me to handle.”

“H-How can you be so impertinent when the person in question is sitting right in front of you!? Mmmmmm, just imagining the emperor forcibly taking me right here in front of Master is making me... Haaah... Mmm... I may have to change my underwear.”

Upon seeing the look of ecstasy on Tio’s face, the emperor shrank back in disgust. After a few seconds, he cleared his throat and returned to the topic at hand. Better to pretend the past minute just never happened.

“Personally, I would love to have that bunny girl next to you. I’ve never seen one with hair that color. Not only that, she didn’t seem the least bit intimidated by me. In fact, she reminds me of a few toys I captured a while back. There wouldn’t happen to be a connection between the two, would there?”

Shea’s eyes narrowed at Gahard’s mention of the word “toys.” Yue, who was sitting next to her, grabbed Shea’s hand under the table.

“I’m not sure what you mean by toys, but...”

“Unsure what I’m referring to? In that case, how about you come see them later? Most of them escaped, but I’ve still got a few of the women and children in the dungeons. They’re quite—”

Gahard was bluffing. Cam had already helped Hajime make sure he’d released all the captured rabbitmen. He was hoping to tease information out of Hajime by leading him on.

However, Hajime didn’t take the bait.

“Nah, I don’t really care...”

“Oho. Well, perhaps this will pique your interest, then. All of the beastmen I captured were using extremely sharp and durable shortswords. Surely a master Synergist such as yourself must be at least a little curious?”

“I don’t really use swords, so...”

“Is that so... By the way, you wouldn’t happen to know of any special artifacts or magic that could let one sneak in and out of a highly guarded prison without being spotted, now would you? You see, no one was able to find out how those beastmen who escaped last night got out.”

“Nope... Sure wish I had something like that.”

“Very well, this is my final question. What will it take to entice you to my side?”

“A method to get back to my old world. If you give me that, I’ll help you out from the other side or something.” Throughout the exchange, Hajime sounded utterly bored.

“Tch... You really are just as the princess described. Sheesh, you’re not a very cute kid, you know that?”

Gahard scratched his head in irritation. Despite his annoyance, the smile on his face proved he was still enjoying himself. He loved having a worthy opponent to go up against.

Furthermore, he’d been able to confirm through their exchange that the things Liliانا had said about him were mostly true. He finally had a good grasp on the kind of person Hajime Nagumo was.

Frankly speaking, Hajime’s attitude toward Gahard was extremely rude. Even though Gahard himself had allowed Hajime to speak freely, normally he would never have stood for being looked down upon. Any other person would have been executed for their impudence.

However, Gahard understood just how dangerous it would be to make an enemy out of Hajime, which was why he permitted Hajime’s insolence. More importantly, as someone who valued strength above all, he knew he should be the one showing respect to Hajime.

In short, he had determined that attempting to recruit or eliminate Hajime would be a bad idea. As he was considering his next move, one of his guards leaned in and whispered something in his ear. Gahard nodded and rose to his feet. It appeared their audience was over.

“Well, I learned everything I wanted to, at least. For now, I’ll be satisfied with that. Both the empire and the kingdom have too many other pressing matters that must be handled first. Oh yes. I am planning on holding a welcome ball for Princess Liliانا tonight. As it will also be where I announce my son’s engagement to her, I would appreciate it if you and your party were present as well. Regardless of

the truth about the gods, there is no doubt that the hero and his entourage still have a great deal of popular support. It would be an honor to have them grace the ball. Should I expect you to attend?"

Gahard ignored Kouki and the others' shock, and gave Hajime a meaningful glance. Then, without waiting for a reply, he strode out of the room, leaving the others to grapple with his sudden declaration.

It was only when the door slammed shut behind him that Kouki and the others returned to their senses. They rounded on Liliana and pressed her for answers.

"Lily, you're engaged!? What on earth happened!?"

"Well... if the demons invade again, we'll have no choice but to fight. It's true that we have no reason to be at war and this is all part of the gods' scheme, but the demons don't know that. The kingdom has lost its king, and the new king is only ten years old. With our kingdom in such a precarious position, we have no choice but to strengthen ties with our allies," Liliana said nonchalantly.

Kouki was speechless. However, Shizuku wasn't. She frowned sternly and responded.

"And that's why you offered to marry the emperor's son?"

"Yes. He is next in line for the empire's throne. In truth, my father was planning on having me marry the prince from the beginning. The only thing this ball is for is to make the engagement official. The public needs to see our unity in the face of the demons' invasion."

"What about your advisers? Don't you need to confer with them?"

"Though I haven't consulted with them, I suspect they won't object. As I said, this was meant to happen from the very beginning. Besides, I am the acting sovereign of the kingdom. Lundel's too young to be given any real authority, and my mother never liked being a public figure, which means even if they disagree, no one has the authority to object. Right now, speed is of the essence. I don't have time to get everyone's approval."

Liliana's voice was exceptionally calm. She didn't seem the least bit distressed about her fate, showing that she was determined to do everything she could for her country.

Kouki scowled and questioned her.

"Lily, do you love the emperor's son?"

Liliana gave him a troubled smile.

"It doesn't matter whether I love him or not. This marriage is a political one, after all. However, because he's next in line for the throne, he has a lot of concubines already. I'm sure many of them were hoping to become the next empress, but... well, thanks to my rank, I'll jump right past them and become the formal wife of the future emperor. Amazing, isn't it? Well, I'll be the youngest among his harem, and the thought of dealing with their jealousy does make me a

little nervous, but..."

Liliana tried her best to sound as lighthearted and cheerful as possible, but it was obvious she was forcing herself, which only made Kouki angrier.

"H-How can you say that!? You don't even love him, so how can you consider marrying a guy like that!?"

"It may seem strange to you, Kouki-san, but this is standard for royalty. I've been prepared for this since the moment I was born."

"What do you mean standard... Sure, you're a princess, but you're a girl too, Lily! Don't you want to spend your life with a guy you truly love?"

All Liliana could do in response was smile awkwardly. Naturally, she too yearned to experience a heart-throbbing romance and marry someone she loved. Especially now, after she'd spent so many nights together with Kaori and Shizuku, hearing stories of how relationships worked in their world.

Still, she knew that was an unattainable dream. As royalty, she had a duty to fulfill.

So please, stop reminding me of the future I can no longer have. Please don't make me say things I don't mean... Still unsatisfied, Kouki tried to push even further. But before he could, Hajime got up off his seat.

The words Kouki wanted to say died in his mouth, and he turned his attention to Hajime.

However, Hajime didn't say anything. He just started walking toward the door, the same bored expression still on his face. He wasn't interested in Liliana's fate, he just wanted to leave.

With nowhere else to vent his frustration, Kouki rounded on Hajime.

"Hey, Nagumo! Are you telling me you don't care at all about this!?"

"Huh? Should I? They're getting married for the sake of their countries, right? Guys like us who have no idea how the political world works shouldn't be sticking our noses into their affairs."

"Ngh, b-but..." Kouki was starting to sound like he had the night before Cam's rescue. Hajime doubted he would go on a rampage so long as Shizuku was around to keep him in check, but he decided to nip the problem in the bud just in case.

"Don't forget, we've got our own mission. You better not do anything stupid. If you get in the way of the operation, I'll beat you up so bad you won't even be able to talk." That was all he said before walking out of the audience chamber.

Yue and Tio gave Liliana nods of solidarity as they followed out after him. They'd both been former royalty, so they could sympathize with her situation. Shea, too, seemed worried for Liliana. However, at

Yue's urging, she obediently followed the others out the door.

"Dammit... Every single time that bastard just—"

"Calm down, Kouki. This might not actually be something you need to worry that much about."

Kouki turned to Shizuku in shock.

"Aren't you worried about her!?" his accusatory glare seemed to say. However, Kaori, Suzu, and Ryutarou all came to Shizuku's defense.

"Y-Yeah. Good point. If things end up the way we think, then the engagement won't even matter..."

"He said there'd be a welcome ball, right? I suddenly have a very bad feeling about this."

"There'll be a ball alright, but I don't think he'll welcome it very much."

Kouki fell silent. The moment it dawned on him, his expression stiffened. Depending on how the next few hours went, there might not have been any engagement. Confused by their cryptic remarks, Liliana questioned the group.

"Huh? Wait, guys? What's going on? Why're you all looking at each other like that? I'm starting to get really worried here!" Liliana looked from one student to the other, but no one gave her a reply. Needless to say, Liliana could feel another stomachache coming on.

Still worried, Liliana went back to her room to prepare for the coming ball. Kouki and the others returned to their assigned quarters as well. With the help of Helina and the empire's maids, she was outfitted in a regal dress worthy of a princess.

"My, you look stunning, Liliana-sama!"

"Truly... You look like a fairy, My Lady!"

"I'm sure the prince will be pleased as well!"

The imperial maids squealed in excitement when they saw Liliana in her finished outfit. It wasn't just empty flattery, either. Their enraptured expressions made it obvious that they truly thought Liliana looked stunning in her dress.

At the age of 14, Liliana was straddling the border between childhood and adulthood. The pale pink dress she was wearing brought out the charms of both her maturity and innocence. She truly looked as lovely as a flower.

"Heh, of course she looks great."

"Helina, why do you look so proud when I'm the one they're praising?"

Liliana smiled at her grinning maid to show she meant no ill will, then looked herself over in the mirror. Once she was done, she nodded in satisfaction to herself.

Even if this was just a political marriage, even if the man she was getting married to was a bigger womanizer than his dad, even if the only time she'd met him, he'd beaten up the kingdom's apprentice knights under the pretense of "training," even if he was a bully who liked to show off, he was still going to be her husband.

That meant, as his wife, she couldn't afford to arrive at the ball in an outfit that would embarrass him. Besides, this was her engagement party as well, so she had to dress for the occasion.

But try as she might, she couldn't get Kouki's earlier words out of her head. "You don't even love him, how can you consider marrying a guy like that!?"

Though she didn't let it show, she still yearned for a future where she didn't have to marry the crown prince. Her worries regarding her future husband's character only compounded those worries.

Foolish as it was, she still entertained a faint hope that a gallant hero would save her at the last minute. The two of them would grow closer as they overcame hardships together, and then despite their different social stations, get married and live happily together. Of course, she knew that was never happening.

She shook her head, driving those happy delusions from her mind. Because she had been a precocious child, Liliana had always accepted that this would be her duty, which was why even if she secretly despised her husband-to-be, she still planned on being as upstanding a wife as possible. She was determined to act the part of the perfect princess during the ball. And so, she couldn't let these fanciful dreams shake her resolve.

You have to keep it together, she told herself. Just then, she heard a commotion outside her room. Before she could even take a single step, her door burst open and a large man waltzed into her room as if he owned the place. Liliana's imperial guards tried to restrain him, but he shrugged them off with little effort.

"Oho, so this is what you're wearing tonight... Not bad."

"Baius-sama. Barging into a lady's room is not a very gentlemanly thing to do."

"What!? I'm the man who's gonna be your husband! Don't you dare talk back to me."

Baius D. Hoelscher, crown prince of the Hoelscher Empire, was both a vulgar and violent man. On the outside, he looked just like his father, Gahard. He was 26 years of age, and hadn't changed one bit from the vicious, vindictive man Liliana had met one year ago. Even back then he'd been a sadistic monster who loved lording over people and saw others as nothing more than playthings. The way he looked at Liliana made it clear he saw her as his property. She felt chills run up her spine as he ran his gaze over her body.

“Okay, you lot get out.” Baius ordered the maids and Liliana’s guards out with a grin. The imperial maids left at once, but naturally the imperial guards hesitated to leave their master alone. Helina didn’t even try to hide her distaste and glared angrily at Baius.

When he saw Helina’s defiant gaze, Baius narrowed his eyes dangerously. Worried about what he might do to the others, Liliana hurriedly told her servants and knights to leave.

“If anything happens, just yell out and we’ll come right away,” Helina whispered those words into Liliana’s ear as she walked past, and Liliana nodded in response. With one final backward glance, Helina and the knights hesitantly closed their master’s door behind them.

“Hmph. You should at least discipline your mutts better.”

“They are not my ‘mutts.’ They are true and loyal vassals.”

“Still a tomboy, huh? I remember how you chewed me out years ago when you were barely still a kid. I knew back then that I wanted to make you mine.”

Baius licked his lips and grinned lasciviously. Though Liliana stiffened, she held her ground and met her future husband’s gaze. But then, Baius suddenly stepped forward and groped her chest.

“Huh!? Owwww! That hurts!”

“Looks like you’ve grown up nicely. Still a bit on the small side, but they’ll do.”

“S-Sto—” Liliana face contorted in pain. That only made Baius more aroused, however, and he pushed her to the ground with a sneer.

Though Liliana screamed, the guards outside didn’t respond.

“Cry and scream all you want. This room was specially designed to be soundproof. Besides, even if those mutts of yours came back, they wouldn’t dare to raise their weapons against the crown prince. Hell, let’s call them in here. I’m sure they’d love to watch you lose your virginity. Gahaha!”

“Why... you...” Though she was pale as a sheet, Liliana continued glaring angrily at Baius.

“Yes, that’s it! It’s those eyes I wanted to see! I can’t wait to dye them in pain, despair, and pleasure!” Baius’ grin grew even more warped.

“Nothing brings me more pleasure in life than trampling and humiliating those who oppose me. I just love seeing their defiant expressions crumble as they realize how powerless they are. Making fools like you kneel before me is truly the height of ecstasy. Ever since I first tasted this exhilaration, I’ve been addicted. Liliana, from the moment we first met, when you glared so fiercely at me, I knew that I had to make you mine and break you.”

“You monster...”

“Hey Liliana, how does it feel knowing you’re going to lose your virginity before your marriage. Hell, before we even announce our engagement? Will you even be able to show your face at the party after this? Hahaha, I’m looking forward to seeing how it goes!”

Though Liliana held no love for Baius, she’d thought that if she supported him well as his wife, she’d eventually be able to change him into a more upstanding ruler. But after seeing the depths of his depravity, her resolve to reform him began to crack.

Liliana understood now. The man pinning her down and savoring her despair was in many ways the perfect person to rule the empire. He took what he wanted by force, beating the weak into submission. He was the very embodiment of the empire’s ideals.

The dress Liliana had chosen specifically for Baius was ripped to shreds by his hands. She reddened in shame as her skin was exposed little by little.

Once she’d been stripped to her underwear, Baius leaned in for a kiss. He kept his eyes open wide, wanting to savor Liliana’s terror until the very last moment.

When she tried to turn away, he grabbed her jaw and forced her to look into his eyes. Liliana was so afraid and ashamed that she didn’t even notice she was crying. She’d resolved herself to marry someone she didn’t love, but this was too much.

I want to find someone I love and be happy too! The feelings she’d kept locked up all this time started slipping through the cracks in her armor. She couldn’t keep pretending this was fine because it was her duty as a princess.

In the depths of her despair, Liliana remembered something Kaori and Shizuku had told her. Back in the labyrinth, when they’d lost all hope, Hajime had swept in and saved them from their plight. He’d crushed the unreasonable situation they were trapped in with an even more unreasonable strength, like the hero of a fairy tale.

If only he would save me too. The rational side of her knew it was foolish to expect such a thing, but the more childish side of her couldn’t help but pray.

Please, save me. Just then, a small spider dropped down from the ceiling and landed on Baius’ shoulder.

“Wha...” Liliana murmured in shock. A second later, the spider raised one of its legs and stabbed it into Baius’ neck.

“Owww! What the hell!?! Something just stabbed my neck...” Baius rubbed his neck and pulled back from Liliana. He had been seconds away from stealing her lips, and probably more.

The spider was already scurrying back up the thread dangling from the ceiling, and was safe from retaliation. Liliana watched it go,

still unsure of what had just happened.

“What the... everything’s spinning—” Baius started slurring his words, and lost consciousness before he could even finish a sentence. His limp body fell on top of Liliana, pinning her to the ground.

“Wha? Huh?”

The spider scurried back down the thread and landed on Baius’ shoulder once more. As Baius was currently laying on top of Liliana, that also put the spider inches from her face. Upon seeing it up close, Liliana noticed something strange about the spider’s body.

“It’s made... of metal?” Indeed, the spider crawling across Baius’ shoulder was made entirely of metal.

As Liliana’s eyes widened in surprise, the metal spider lifted a different leg from last time and thrust it into Baius’ neck, perhaps looking to finish him off for good. Though he was unconscious, his body still spasmed at the pinprick. However, he was still breathing, so it appeared the spider hadn’t really killed him.

Liliana suddenly remembered she was still stuck underneath Baius and wriggled her way out. She rose herself into a sitting posture and looked at the metal spider again.

It stared at her with its crystalline eyes for a few seconds before beginning the climb back up to the ceiling.

“Ah, p-please wait! Are you...”

The spider ignored Liliana’s pleas, scuttled across the ceiling, and disappeared through a crack in the wall. Then, there was a flurry of tiny red sparks, and the crack closed up behind it.

As Liliana was gathering the scraps of her torn dress to cover herself up, she finally realized what must have happened. A smile spread across her face.

“Thank you... Nagumo-san,” she whispered.

Of course, so long as Liliana was engaged to Baius, she would have to deal with him eventually. All Hajime had done was postpone the inevitable. But still, it made Liliana happy to know that when she’d cried out for salvation, he’d come to her rescue.

She held the torn pieces of her dress close to her chest, as if they were something extremely precious.

After the meeting with Gahard, Hajime and the others were shown to their quarters.

Once he’d gotten to his room, Hajime flopped down onto the sofa and closed his eyes. He lay there, unmoving, except to occasionally take a few sips of water. Neither Yue nor anyone else disturbed him. They knew better than to interrupt him when he was concentrating.

He waited there until the sun started to sink below the horizon. Only when the sky was dyed bright orange did he finally open his

eyes.

Noticing the slight shift in his posture, Yue walked over and sat next to him.

“How’d it go, Hajime?”

“Mmm, perfect. I had to deal with a little trouble in the middle, but I still got through 70% of the preparations.”

Kaori didn’t miss the tinge of exhaustion in his voice and hurried over to start healing him.

“That must have been tough. Were there a lot of traps?”

“Yeah. Guess I should have expected as much from the imperial castle. Thankfully, I don’t have to disarm them all.”

“Indeed, it is fortunate that the emperor wishes to hold a ball tonight. It will be easier to put our plans into motion with crowds of people milling about.”

“Do you really think it’ll work?” Shea asked in a worried voice as she massaged Hajime’s shoulders.

The showdown to decide the fate of her family would begin in a few hours. It was only natural for her to be nervous.

In response, Hajime rubbed her ears, Yue pinched her cheeks, Tio stroked her hair, and Kaori held her hand. They all smiled at her, and Shea felt herself tearing up.

But she didn’t let the tears fall. They may have been tears of happiness, but it was still too early to shed them. Instead, she gave everyone the most dazzling smile she could muster. She had comrades she could trust, and a family she loved. What more could she ask for?

It was that unflinching positivity that Hajime and the others loved most about her. Kouki, Ryutarou, Shizuku and Suzu were captivated by it as well. After confirming that Shea was alright, Hajime grinned like a kid about to pull a huge prank and declared his intent.

“The stage has been set. All that remains is for the festival to begin. Let’s get ourselves dressed so we’re ready to welcome the stars of the show.”

Yue and the others smiled fearlessly, while Kouki and the students nodded nervously.

Chapter IV: The Empire Vs. The Strongest Rabbits

The sun had fully set, and darkness shrouded the imperial castle. Two soldiers on patrol walked across the castle grounds. They both held magical torches that beat back the night, negating any potential intruder's greatest asset.

"Haaah... All the big shots are probably at the ball right now... living it up and eating all the good food."

"Hey, cut the chatter. If we get caught for dereliction of duty, I'll be punished with you."

The first soldier sighed as he looked wistfully up at the castle. Dozens of lights dotted the central tower, where the ball was being held.

His partner frowned, but it seemed the reason for his displeasure wasn't solely because he was worried about being punished. If anything, he was annoyed because he'd been made even more conscious of the fact that they were stuck working while other people got to have all the fun. In truth, he was thinking the exact same thing his partner was.

"Don't you wish you could get promoted enough to be invited to one of those?"

"Well, yeah... If I was important enough to attend a ball like that, I'd be able to get all the money and women I want..."

"I know, right? It'd be great if I could go to a fancy party like that and spend the night in the arms of a noble lady. Aaah, I wish I wasn't stuck here doing these useless patrols. I wanna fuck a girl. A cute bunny girl would be best."

"You really have a thing for them, huh? Pretty much all the those girls are hotter than human ones, but every time we go to the brothels you only go for the bunnies."

"They're just so much fun to torment. I love hearing their screams when I go in raw."

"You're a pretty messed up dude..."

"What're you talking about? Practically all the bunny girls look like they're begging to be bullied. I'm just granting their wishes. Besides, you're one to talk. You've mindbroken plenty of bunny girls yourself."

"I can't help it. I just can't get enough of their screams."

The two soldiers looked at each other and started guffawing. To people of the empire, beastmen were nothing more than tools. Replaceable tools meant to be used for nothing more than stress relief or sexual gratification. These two soldiers weren't particularly cruel or anything. Debasing and humiliating beastmen was standard practice throughout the empire.

Suddenly, one of the soldiers saw something dart past a nearby building. He stopped laughing and turned around.

"Hey, did you just..."

"Huh? What is it?"

The first soldier warily approached the building. His partner hurriedly held up his torch and followed after him.

"Who goes there?" the lead soldier asked in a loud voice. He thrust his torch forward, illuminating a narrow gap between two buildings. It was just large enough for a person to slip through.

However, there was no one inside.

"Guess I was just seeing things..." the first soldier muttered in relief. He shook his head and turned back to his partner.

"Sorry, looks like I— Hey, Maul? Where'd you go, Maul?" But his partner was nowhere to be found. All that was left was his torch, rolling slowly across the floor. The soldier looked around wildly, but there was no one in sight. Chills ran down his spine.

In order to hide his fear, he yelled in an angry voice.

"Oi Maul, get out here already! This isn't fu— Mmmf!?"

Two hands silently reached out of the alleyway that should have been empty. A matte black knife that seemed to suck the light out of its surroundings was in one of them. One hand covered the soldier's mouth, while the other thrust the knife into the back of his skull.

The soldier spasmed for a few seconds before going limp. The two arms then retreated into the darkness, dragging the lifeless soldier with them.

A few seconds later, their torches were snuffed out as well, plunging the courtyard into darkness. A faint voice, soft enough to be snuffed out by the night breeze, rang out through the courtyard.

"HQ, this is Alpha. I have successfully gained control of point C."

"Alpha, this is HQ Good work. Now head to point E2. Your targets are the four sentries there. Circle around from the east."

"HQ, this is Alpha. Roger."

A number of figures dressed from head to toe in black silently made their way across the castle courtyard. They wore black face masks and hoods as well, so the only things visible were their eyes, which glimmered with a fierce light. Each of the figures had two short swords strapped to their back.

Any Japanese person who saw them would have said they looked

like ninjas. However, while the outfit hid their individual identities, it would be obvious to anyone who saw them what race these figures belonged to. After all, their bunny ears were poking out through their hoods. They couldn't be anyone but rabbitmen, and the only rabbitmen who were capable of fighting were the Haulia.

The group reached their designated location and hid under the shadow of a nearby building. One of them peeked his head out from behind the corner, and as reported, he saw four sentries waiting up ahead. The sentries were split in pairs of two, but they stayed close enough to be in sight of each other.

The lead Haulia gave the other three members of his squad a hand signal. The three of them then nodded and melted into the night.

A few seconds later, there was a flash of light a few meters away, indicating that the others were in position. The Haulia had picked a moment when the sentries weren't looking to send their signal.

Another one of the Haulia pulled out a tiny vial and popped the lid for a split second. He too made sure that the sentries weren't looking when he did so. The vial was a custom signaling torch made out of green glowstone.

Once they'd finished signaling to each other, the two Haulia gave another hand signal to the team member paired up with them. Then, both pairs of Haulia erased their presence and snuck up behind a single pair of sentries. The moment the soldiers let each other out of their sights, they were assassinated with extreme precision. The first found himself with a knife sticking out of his skull.

"Ah—!?" The other had his hands pinned behind his back before a short sword slipped between his kidneys.

The final Haulia grabbed the torches before they could clatter to the floor and snuffed them out. After that, he looked around to make sure no traces of their existence had been left at the scene. Then, the three Haulia dragged their victims behind the building. This, however, they couldn't do without making any noise, and the remaining pair of sentries looked questioning in their direction.

The soldiers they'd expected to see weren't there. The only thing left in that spot was darkness.

"Where the hell'd they go?"

The sentries strained their eyes, and were able to make out vague shadows moving in the darkness. It appeared as if someone was dragging someone else.

Warning bells sounded inside the sentries' minds. They grabbed the whistles hanging around their necks and put them to their mouths. But before they could blow them, they had their throats slashed.

Without even a chance to scream, the two sentries were consigned to the oblivion of death. Their torches were snuffed out, and their

bodies dragged back behind the building.

All around the castle, guards were being slaughtered one after another. Most of the soldiers stationed in the castle's guardrooms had had their heads parted from their shoulders. Plus, all of the soldiers sleeping in the barracks had been put into a deep slumber thanks to the effects of a certain powder made from the plants found in the sea of trees.

Even if someone did manage to sound the alarm, no one in the barracks would so much as stir. They'd sleep soundly until morning and wake up feeling surprisingly refreshed.

A crescent moon hung in the night sky. Also known as the horned moon, it was the first phase the moon one saw after the new moon. And because of how thin the crescent was, this phase of the moon bore a striking resemblance to the devil's grin.

Tonight, it almost seemed as if the moon was sneering at the empire. Perhaps it seemed that way because the nation who valued strength above all was about to be ravaged by the very race they'd ridiculed as the weakest.

Liliana's welcome ball was as magnificent and ostentatious as one would expect a royal ball to be. The food was served buffet style, and hundreds of dishes, from savory to sweet, covered the massive table that was to one side of the hall. Every dish imaginable had been placed atop the pure white tablecloth for the guests' enjoyment. The hall's decorations, too, were absolutely stunning. Tapestries and chandeliers draped the walls and ceiling.

—HQ, this is Alpha. We have successfully neutralized point H4.

—HQ, this is Bravo. All J points are now under our control.

—HQ, this is Charlie. All soldiers within the barracks have been incapacitated.

—HQ, this is Echo. We have secured the second prince, the crown princess, and the emperor's grandson.

Hajime strolled through the party venue with an unbelievably cheerful smile on his face. He even stopped to talk to the nobles and dignitaries who came up to him.

He didn't let anything in his expression give away the fact that he was constantly receiving reports of the Haulia's activities through the earring-shaped artifact he was wearing.

Hajime wasn't the only one being accosted by nobles. Kouki and the others had to deal with a procession of important people who wanted to get into the hero party's good graces.

The hero and his comrades were the stars of this ball. The empire had heard of how Kouki and his party had gotten further through the Great Orcus Labyrinth than anyone in history. The nobles, who valued

strength as much as anyone in the empire, were extremely curious to learn more about the kids who had achieved such a feat. And of course, they were also hoping to make connections with the world's most influential people.

The people who came up to Hajime had different ulterior motives in mind, however. Their objective was to get closer to the group of beautiful girls who hadn't left Hajime's side for even a moment.

Even when they were talking to Hajime, they kept stealing glances at Yue and the others. Hajime didn't blame them. They had gone all out in dressing up for Liliana's welcome-cum-engagement ball. Their dazzling outfits, combined with their natural good looks, made them stand out far more than anyone else in the hall.

"Woow. I never knew there were places like this in the world. You'd never see something like this in the sea of trees."

Shea, who was dressed in a periwinkle-blue dress, stared in amazement at the opulence around her. Every time she moved her slender, shapely legs peeked out from beneath her miniskirt.

Though the bottom half of her dress revealed a lot of skin, it didn't feel the least bit indecent. It was more modest than her usual clothing, and it emphasized her natural cuteness.

Normally she kept her hair down, but for the party she'd bunched her bangs up at the front, and tied the back into a ponytail. Her hairstyle, too, made her look cuter than usual.

"Both the food and the liquor here are exquisite. I must make sure to enjoy them while I still can." Tio sipped a glass of expensive wine and eyed the buffet table hungrily. She wore an elegant black dress in place of her usual black kimono.

It was a tight-fitting dress that showed off her body's curves, with a plunging neckline and an open back. Every single time she took a step, her large breasts threatened to spill out of the fabric holding them. Half the men in the ball had their eyes glued to her chest, earning them disapproving glares from their female companions.

"Ugh... Don't we stand out a little too much?" Blushing, Kaori looked timidly around her. She was wearing a slender dress that left her shoulders fully exposed. While she lacked Tio's voluptuous breasts, Kaori more than made up for it with a perfectly proportioned body. The sides of the dress parted at the waist, much like a cheongsam, showing off Kaori's slender legs. She had her silver hair up in a bun, leaving much of her back exposed.

"Mmm..." Yue, the vampire Hajime loved more than anything in the world, trailed the group in a pure white wedding dress. It opened up at the shoulders and was decorated with a mountain of frills. She had done her hair up in a ponytail, which she had fastened with a flower-shaped hair ornament.

Though she was exposing the least skin out of the four, her ruby red lips, pale white complexion, and seductive gaze captivated all the men in the room. As always, there was a huge gap between her childish appearance and mature aura.

Hajime, Kouki, and Ryutarou had waited outside while the girls changed, so this was their first time seeing them in their new dresses. Needless to say, they were as captivated by the girls as everyone else in the room.

Hajime in particular though only had eyes for Yue. It was obvious he was smitten. Yue noticed his fervent gaze, and gave him a charming smile.

Meanwhile, Shea and the others started sulking because Hajime was ignoring them. Before they could give him a piece of their mind though, Hajime walked over to Yue, hugged her tight, and kissed her in front of the crowd of stunned onlookers.

It took a lot of effort for Shea and the rest to pull Hajime off Yue, and naturally his bold stunt left the hall in an uproar, so it took some time before the atmosphere returned to normal.

Considering who seemed to be stealing all the attention, it was easy to forget that this was actually supposed to be Liliana's engagement ball. Hajime spent the next few minutes fending off the horde of smiling nobles who tried to get close to Yue and the others.

Incidentally, Shizuku and Suzu looked rather fetching in their dresses as well. They were more than a match for most of the noble ladies, but because they hadn't been as interested in trying to dress up for Hajime's sake, the two of them didn't stand out nearly as much as the four other girls.

Shizuku had made a tactical decision to look more plain than the others, and it paid off well for her. While Kouki was being mobbed by people, she was left mostly alone.

On the other hand, Ryutarou was busy stuffing himself at the buffet table while Suzu followed after him and scolded him for his lack of manners. Though her words weren't very persuasive when she herself was gorging herself on the cakes lining the dessert side of the table.

"I must say, all of your companions are stunning beauties, Nagumo-dono."

"Indeed. I would be most honored if you would be willing to allow me to dance with one later."

"If there's time for it, maybe."

—HQ, this is Delta. The explosives have been set.

—HQ, this is India. All M points are under our control.

The nobleman Hajime was talking to tilted his head in confusion at Hajime's suggestive smile. Before he could ask what Hajime meant,

the hall broke out in excited muttering. Liliana and Baius, the guests of honor, had arrived. The guard at the gate announced their entrance in a loud and dignified voice.

Liliana walked through the grand double doors and into the hall proper. When the other guests saw her dress, they whispered to each other in shock and confusion. She was wearing a jet-black one-piece that seemed to suck in the surrounding light. Considering that this ball was being held in her honor, it wasn't appropriate for her to wear such dark clothing.

Moreover, her expression made it clear that she was only attending because it was her duty. That, combined with her imposing dress, created a wall around her that made it difficult for others to approach.

Baius, on the other hand, was scowling angrily at anyone and everyone. The two certainly didn't look like they were excited about announcing their engagement.

Baius' mistresses had been planning on giving Liliana a piece of their minds, but they were so shocked by this unexpected entrance that they just stood there like everyone else.

Eventually, the crowd started to applaud, but the atmosphere was still strained. Amidst the clapping, the two of them made their way up to the center stage. Confused, the chamberlain overseeing the ball bade the guests to resume partying.

Gahard greeted Liliana and his son with a knowing grin, then signaled for the music to start. Liliana would now be busy dancing with various dignitaries and introducing herself over and over.

Elegant orchestra music filled the ballroom, sweeping away the awkward atmosphere from earlier. Men and women made their way to the center of the hall and started dancing as they pleased. Liliana's first dance went to Baius, but the two of them were dancing rather stiffly. Liliana's expression made it clear she would rather be doing anything else. Any time Baius tried to pull her close, Liliana would match her steps to the tempo of the music and create some distance between them.

Once the first song finished, Liliana fled from Baius and quickly found another partner to dance with. Her departure irritated Baius, but greeting others during a dance was an integral part of high society, so he couldn't do anything to stop her. For some reason, he appeared to be nursing his crotch as well. In truth, he'd only recently woken up. When he had, he'd found he couldn't feel anything in his nether regions.

He'd tried to press Liliana for details, but she'd stalled him by saying that unless he did as she instructed, she wouldn't introduce him to the only person capable of curing his condition. Though it had

irked him immensely, Baius had had no choice but to obey.

Naturally, the reason Baius couldn't feel his balls was because of what the metal spider had injected in him. There was more than one way to destroy a man's manhood.

—HQ, this is Romeo. Point P is under our control.

—HQ, this is Tango. Point R is under our control.

"This isn't like Lily... Normally she never shows other people her true emotions," Kaori muttered to herself as she watched Liliana curtly greet a group of nobles.

"Well, after what happened, I don't blame her. She's probably got a lot to deal with."

"Something happened?" Yue looked inquisitively up at Hajime.

"Nagumo-kun, what did you do to Lily?"

"Hey, Yaegashi. Why're you assuming I'm at fault here?"

Shizuku glared suspiciously at Hajime, her red dress billowing about her.

"Because Lily would never act like that... and whenever something abnormal happens, you're usually the culprit. That theory hasn't been proven wrong yet. Besides, it's obvious you know something."

"Tch, I wish I could say you're wrong, but you're not. Look, I really didn't do anything this time. The prince was trying to rape her, so I just helped her out a little."

"I see, so the prince was... Wait, what?"

"Wait, Hajime-kun!? What'd you just say!?"

Everyone turned to Hajime in shock. Fortunately, Hajime had driven away all the nobles who'd tried to ask the girls for a dance with his Intimidation, so none of them had heard the bombshell he'd just dropped. Only Yue, Shea, Tio, Kaori, and Shizuku were nearby.

Kouki had been dragged off to dance with all the ladies in attendance, while Ryutarou was still busy eating. Suzu had been half-kidnapped by a dashing older man and was currently dancing without any real understanding of what was going on.

That meant only the five girls present knew about the prince's attempted rape. However, Kaori and Shizuku's loud insistence that Hajime explain the details meant that they were starting to draw attention.

"Ah, well, you see... Yue, wanna dance?"

"Mmm... Gladly."

"Ah, wait right there, Nagumo-kun! You can't just leave because you don't feel like explaining! We need answers!"

"Th-That's right! This is important! What happened!?"

Realizing it would be too much of a pain to explain everything, Hajime fled to the center of the ballroom together with Yue. The pair of them stood out even more than Liliana did. Yue's beauty outclassed

everyone else in the room, while Hajime cut a memorable figure with his white hair, eyepatch, and tuxedo.

As former royalty, Yue was familiar with most of the popular dances, and Hajime was able to keep in step with her thanks to Riftwalk. Together, the two of them danced passably well.

“Are you having fun, Yue?”

“Yeah...”

Seeing their ostentatious outfits and happy smiles, an uninformed onlooker would be forgiven for thinking it was their engagement party and not Liliana’s.

At first, the musicians had all been desperate to wipe away the awkward atmosphere with their music, but after seeing Hajime and Yue thoroughly enjoying themselves, they were able to play more naturally as well.

Starting with the two of them, the other guests began to enjoy themselves a little more.

Liliana watched them steal the show with a smile on her face. There was just the tiniest hint of jealousy in her expression, too.

After seeing the two of them dance, all thoughts of what had happened to Liliana, or the festivities that were soon to follow, flew out of the girls’ heads. The only thing that mattered now was fighting for the right to be the second to dance with Hajime.

After a few minutes the song came to an end, and Hajime finished the dance by lightly kissing Yue on the lips. The surrounding guests all burst into applause. For once, there was no jealousy in the men’s gazes, just admiration. On the other hand, the noble ladies were sighing dreamily.

Hajime and Yue bowed to the crowd, then clasped hands and walked back to their comrades. Tio, who’d apparently won whatever contest they were having, stepped forward to go next. Eyes brimming with expectation, she held out her hand. However, Tio was forever doomed to never be a main heroine.

“Hajime Nagumo-sama. Would you do me the honor of this dance?”

This time, she was intercepted by Liliana.

“Princess... Shouldn’t the star of this ball be with her betrothed?”

“Oh my, that’s a rather cruel thing to say after stealing the spotlight, wouldn’t you say?”

“You’re the one who looks like she doesn’t want to be here, I just helped you blend with the background. Besides, is it alright to leave that prince alone?”

“Everyone’s finished the required social niceties, so now I can finally enjoy the ball. From the very start, it’s a princess’ duty to dance with different people. Look, even Baius-sama is dancing with one of

his concubines.”

“Wow... I see you stopped bothering trying to act polite.”

“Heh.. Now then... will you dance with me, or not?”

It was clear from how pushy Liliana was being that she didn’t just want to dance with Hajime. There was something she wished to discuss with him in private. Hajime could more or less guess what it was, and he really didn’t want to talk about it.

But as he opened his mouth to turn her down, Yue shot him a withering glare.

“Don’t embarrass her in public.” Yue was being surprisingly considerate of Liliana. It seemed she’d taken a liking to the princess. Emboldened by having Yue on their side for once, Kaori and Shizuku also pressured Hajime to accept.

Seeing as he was outnumbered, Hajime smiled wanly and agreed.

“Alright, alright. It would be an honor to dance with you, Princess.”

“Thank you...”

As there were people watching, Hajime decided to treat Liliana with more respect than he normally would. He reverently took her hand and led her to the center of the dance floor.

Everyone’s gazes locked on them again, making Liliana blush in embarrassment. No one noticed that Tio was still standing there, her arm limply outstretched.

“T-To think I would be interrupted seconds before my big moment! I must say, Master, you know how to make a lady excited! Haaah, haaah... Mmm...” No one paid any attention to her perverted outbursts, either.

The next song began, and Hajime and Liliana started to dance. The two swayed elegantly back and forth for a while until Liliana leaned in closer and rested her head on Hajime’s shoulder. She kept dancing as she whispered into his ear.

“Thank you for saving me earlier...”

“Figured that’s what you wanted to talk about... I’m surprised you noticed, actually.”

“I can’t imagine anyone other than you crafting such an abnormal creature, Nagumo-san. Also, the crimson glow of your mana is something I’d never forget...”

“I see. Well, considering how that guy is, this probably won’t be any more than a temporary solution.”

“You certainly don’t mince words. But even if it doesn’t solve my problems, I’m happy you came to my aid. After hearing from Kaori how you rescued her, I started to hope that maybe you’d save me as well.”

She took her head off Hajime’s shoulder and beamed at him. Her

smile suddenly made her appear far more charming than she had when she'd been standing by Baius' side. When they saw it, the onlookers started chattering excitedly to each other.



“So is that dress your way of blowing off steam?”

“Are you saying I don’t look good in it?”

“You do, but... I think that pink dress suited you better. You picked the opposite color to make a statement, didn’t you?”

“I did. If my fiancé is a rapist, then I have no obligation to look good for him. Also... if you know about the pink dress, then you really did see everything through that spider’s eyes, didn’t you? Including my immodest appearance. *Hic*... I can’t get married now.”

Liliana made a big show of breaking down and crying into Hajime’s shoulder. He took one look at her and muttered “Give me a break...” with a weary sigh.

“Even if you’re not being that loud, don’t say stuff that’ll cause misunderstandings. Also, stop sticking so close to me. You’re pissing the prince off.”

“Who cares. After this ball, I’ll have to act the part of the imperial princess for the rest of my life. Let me be a regular girl, just for tonight. Or are you telling me you won’t even listen to this poor princess’ wish? Even though she’s doomed to a future of being raped by her husband and bullied by his mistresses.”

“So it’s a given that he’s going to rape you now...”

“It is.” Liliana buried her face into Hajime’s chest in order to hide her expression. Then, in a timid voice, she whispered.

“If... If I asked you to save me, would you?” Liliana hadn’t actually meant to say that. After all, she knew that the kingdom needed this marriage if it was to survive.

Both Heiligh and Hoelscher had suffered great losses in the previous demon attacks, and the entire northern continent had been thrown into a state of chaos because the Holy Church had been wiped out. In order to restore stability, the people needed a symbol of unity. And as the kingdom’s princess, it fell upon Liliana to provide them that comfort. Even if that meant she had to enter a marriage where her dignity would be stripped from her and her rights would be trampled on.

The reason she’d asked Hajime despite all that was because before, when she’d been trembling in fear and had given up all hope, he really had rescued her. Plus, Yue had looked so happy when she’d been dancing with Hajime earlier. More than anything, though, she was certain he would say no. She’d finally be able to resign herself to her fate once he refused her. In a sense, this was her last selfish act.

However, Hajime’s response ran contrary to all her expectations.

“Well, whether I do anything or not, you’ll be saved either way. Depending on how things go, the empire might fall tonight... At the very least, the prince won’t be leaving this party unscathed.”

“...Huh?”

—HQ, this is Victor. All S points are under our control.

—HQ, this is X-ray. All Y points are under our control.

Hajime looked down at Liliana and grinned. Suddenly, she had a very bad feeling about where this ball was headed. Her expression stiffened, though unlike before it was in genuine trepidation and not annoyance.

Come to think of it, he never did tell me why he returned to the capital. Kouki-san and the others are acting strange, too.

Hajime leaned down and whispered into Liliana's ear.

“Also, if you want something from me, you've gotta say it clearly. I'm not good at picking up on hints, so I might end up doing exactly what you ask for.”

“Ah—” Liliana shivered. Not just because Hajime's breath tickled, but also because she understood what he was implying. Namely, that he really would save her.

Liliana's heart started to beat faster. The rational part of her mind told her she couldn't let herself be saved by Hajime. That her marriage needed to succeed. That she should just throw away that childish, naive part of her.

“Why?” Tears pooled in her eyes. Hajime couldn't tell if it was because she was happy at being saved, or if she was terrified at potentially jeopardizing her alliance with the empire. Either way, his response was the same.

“Because there are people out there who don't want to see you sad.” Hajime flicked his head back toward Kaori.

In other words, he wasn't doing this for Liliana's sake, but because he didn't want the people close to him to agonize over her misfortune. Liliana realized that as well and shot an angry glare at him.

“Even if it was a lie, couldn't you have said it was because you cared about me? I would have completely fallen for you if you did.”

“Why would I want you to fall for me? Anyway, you don't have to worry about anything anymore. So long as you're one of Kaori's precious friends, I won't let anything bad happen to you.”

“You never waver, do you, Nagumo-san? Honestly, I'm a little jealous of Yue-san...”

Liliana looked reproachfully up at Hajime. However, he didn't seem the least bit bothered by her displeasure.

Soon enough, the song reached its climax. Seeing as Hajime wouldn't budge at all, Liliana sighed and gave up on seducing him. She entrusted herself to the music and enjoyed what little remained of the dance.

As the last bars of the song faded away, Liliana reluctantly stepped back. Still holding Hajime's hands, she beamed at him and

whispered “Thank you,” in a quiet voice. At that moment, even Hajime had to admit her smile looked more lovely than any flower. It was the pure smile of a fourteen-year-old girl. All of the onlookers were enthralled by its dazzling radiance. A few passionate sighs escaped from the audience’s lips, too.

After a few seconds of silence, the crowd started clapping even louder than they had for Hajime and Yue’s dance.

Liliana still needed to dance with a few other noblemen, so she left him to finish off her social obligations. Meanwhile, Hajime returned to his comrades to find them all glaring at him.

“Hajime-kun, why do you have to make every girl you meet fall for you?”

“Hajime-san, when did you manage to... I really can’t take my eyes off you for even a moment.”

“Say, Master. Being abandoned by you excited me so much that I had a little... accident. Would it be alright if I left to change my underwear?”

“The reason Lily’s suddenly head over heels for him must have something to do with the rape thing Nagumo-kun was talking about before. She did say he saved her earlier, so he probably won her over completely during that dance. Hey Nagumo-kun, what exactly did you whisper in her ear? You know she’s supposed to get married to someone else, right?”

“Hawawa, I didn’t know you were into NTR, Nagumo-kun! This is too much for me! I can’t handle such crazy fetishes!”

Why’re you making it sound like I already laid my hands on her? Hajime sighed to himself. All he’d done was save her from the prince and dance with her. He hadn’t even intended to do the former, he just happened to be watching when it had happened. Aside from that, he’d just promised to give her the bare minimum of help so that Kaori and the others wouldn’t have to see their friend suffer.

He had zero intention of wooing her. And on the extremely slight, miniscule chance that Liliana had really fallen for him, he could just ignore her advances.

Just in case, he turned to Yue to say as much.

“It’s okay. I know,” she said before he could open his mouth. Then, she took Hajime’s hand and squeezed it tight.

I knew you’d understand, Hajime thought warmly, his love for Yue growing exponentially. Though it seemed like Yue was squeezing his hand a little tighter than usual for whatever reason.

—HQ, this is Zulu. Point Z is under our control.

—All units, this is HQ. Everything’s in place. I will now begin the countdown.

A shiver of excitement ran down the students’ spines. Even Yue

and the others tensed up a little.

Upon hearing the transmission Shea closed her eyes, took a deep breath, then opened them once more. The ferocity of her gaze made Kouki and the others gasp.

“Hajime-san, Yue-san.” Shea swept her gaze over each of her comrades.

Hajime nodded to her and grinned fearlessly.

“From this point on, you’re just the daughter of the Haulia’s chief. Rampage to your heart’s content.”

She returned his grin and responded in turn.

“You got it!” A second later, she erased her presence and left the ballroom. None of the guests saw her leave. And right as she left, the emperor’s herald called for everyone’s attention.

It appeared Gahard had a speech to make. He walked up to the raised stage and spoke in a booming voice.

“Allow me to thank you all again for attending this ball. Thanks to a few unexpected surprises, it turned into a far more interesting party than I imagined.” Gahard looked pointedly at Hajime. Hajime pretended not to notice his gaze, which seemed to please Gahard, who smiled.

A second later, Hajime heard a determined voice through his earring artifact.

—All units, this is Alpha 1. Tonight, we will put an end to the centuries of persecution we have suffered at human hands. Our names will be forever carved into history. We will be remembered as the empire’s bane for generations to come. We stand at the crossroads of fate, men. Whether our legacy ends here or continues on unfettered all hinges on this one battle. Show our enemies no mercy. Teach them what it means to make an enemy out of the strongest race!

“But of course, the party’s just started. Everyone eat, drink, and dance to your heart’s content! I want my son’s and daughter-in-law’s engagement ball to be a night to remember! A toast to their eternal happiness!”

The human emperor and rabbitman chief were giving their speeches simultaneously.

—10, 9, 8...

The countdown of fate was something only Hajime and the rabbitmen could hear.

—Boss... Thank you so much for preparing this battleground.

No one from the empire had the slightest idea of what was happening. After making sure everyone had raised their glasses, Gahard raised his own. He sucked in a deep breath and surveyed his subjects. At the same time, the Haulia got themselves psyched up for the coming battle.

—Get ready for a bloodbath, men!

—Yes, siiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiir!

—4, 3, 2, 1...

The countdown was nearly over.

“This marriage marks the beginning of a joint effort against the demon invasion! Together, we have nothing to fear! Glory to the human race!”

“Glory to the human race!”

—0. May the fortunes of war be with you.

Before the guests could finish their toast, the ballroom was plunged into darkness.

“What the!? What’s going on!?”

“Aaaaaah! Wh-What’s happening!?”

Robbed of their sight, the empire’s nobles started panicking.

“Don’t panic! I’ll light the place up with my ma— Gah!?”

“What’s— Gyaaah!?”

“What in blue bla— Guh!?”

A few of the noblemen remained calm and tried to relight the room to get the situation under control. However, before they could they all collapsed onto the ground. Their screams of pain only served to further aggravate the remaining nobles’ panic.

Confusion and chaos prevented any of them from getting a solid grasp on the situation. Many of the noble ladies especially were running about frantically, which led to them getting picked off even easier.

“Calm yourselves! You bastards are supposed to be imperial men!” Gahard’s voice cut through the darkness. It served as a stabilizing force for the crowd, allowing the nobles to stop cowering in fear and regain their composure. Gahard attempted to bark out further orders, but before he could, there was a series of sharp whooshes. He realized something was coming toward him, and hurriedly raised his sword to block.

“Tch! Sneaky little bastards!”

Arrows rained down on him from all directions. They were surprisingly short, but possessed considerable force despite that. Each of them was fired with pinpoint accuracy, and the barrages came in waves, so even a skilled warrior like Gahard was forced to stay on the defensive. And because of that, he wasn’t able to shout out orders to the other nobles.

However, the fact that he was able to tell where the arrows were heading from of sound alone and then block them with a ceremonial sword proved that he was a monster in his own right.

Metallic clangs echoed one after another as Gahard blocked every arrow shot his way. Plenty more nobles fell before some of them were

able to reorganize themselves and cast fireballs to grant them light. Once they had their vision back, the nobles started shouting for the royal guard. One of them spotted something out of the corner of their vision and looked up just in time to see a shadow flit past them.

“Ah!? Who— Bwuh!?” The young nobleman turned toward the shadow and thrust his hand forward. As he started casting the fireball spell, another shadow rose up behind him. He was so focused on his spellcasting that he didn’t even notice as a jet-black short sword sliced through the back of his unguarded neck.

He didn’t even have time to scream before his head flew off his shoulders. It fell to the ground with a wet thud, the man’s unseeing eyes staring blankly at the ceiling. He had died so fast that he still had a slightly bemused expression on his face, as if he didn’t realize he was dead.

Like moths to a flame, the remaining nobles flocked toward the fire. However, as they caught glimpses of dark shadows beheading people one after another, they skidded to a halt and started backpedaling as fast as they could. Before long, the mages who had cast the fireballs were all dead. Without their casters to sustain them, the fireballs winked out of existence, making the ballroom black once more.

“Hiii! M-Monsters! Monsters are attacking us!”

“I-I don’t wanna die! Someone save me!”

Most of the people cowering in fear were civil officers and noble ladies, but there were also a good number of military men among their ranks. Though, they were all higher-ranking officers who hadn’t been on the front lines in ages. They’d grown weak after living in the lap of luxury for so long, and were unable to think rationally when faced with the threat of death. Unable to mount any resistance, these washed-up officers had their tendons and ligaments sliced through by the mysterious black-clad figures. They all slumped to the ground, writhing in pain.

Still, while there were many spineless cowards among the guests’ ranks, Hoelscher was still an empire founded on strength. There was no way the tougher nobles among them would remain disoriented for long. True, the only person who had a real weapon was Gahard, but a good portion of the nobles had brought their self-defense daggers with them to the ball. Thanks to that, they were able to fend off the Haulia’s attacks and organize into a proper battle formation.

“Damn, these guys are good! I can’t track their presence at all!”

“Less talking, more fighting! Logue, Ted! Make us some light! Everyone else, focus on protecting them!”

The men instantly formed a protective ring around the two casters. These nobles were far more coordinated than the rest. The

surviving members of the imperial guard were also getting in on the action. They linked up with each other and covered Gahard's rear.

Now that Gahard only had to worry about what was in front of him, the arrows weren't as much of a threat. He lazily swatted down another dozen or so of them and started chanting a spell.

Within seconds, he finished his incantation and a dozen or so fireballs popped into existence. He scattered them across the ballroom, illuminating every inch of the room.

"Screw letting them toy around with us! It's time to fight back!" As Gahard was rousing his men, he noticed a small metal cylinder rolling toward him.

"What the? Is this..." Confused, the man who served as Gahard's aide went to take a closer look at the strange object. Just then, Gahard noticed that there were similar metal cylinders rolling toward other groups of nobles who were still fighting. He had a terrible premonition and shouted words of warning.

"Stop! Get away from those!"

"Ah!?" Gahard's aide leaped back on reflex, but it was too late. Though, leaping backward wouldn't have done anything to negate the cylinders' effects anyway. A second later, there was a blinding flash of light, followed by a shrill noise that pierced everyone's eardrums.

"Gaaah!?"

"What the—!?"

Gahard and the others instinctively closed their eyes and covered their ears. However, the damage had already been done. The Haulia's flashbangs had blinded and deafened all of the empire's fighters.

And naturally, the Haulia weren't going to let the opportunity slip past them. They completely masked their presence and charged into their enemies' blind spots. Bereft of two of their most important senses, Gahard's imperial guards were helpless against the Haulia's onslaught. The rabbitmen's black blades glinted in the dim light as they ripped through the guards' tendons and limbs. Screaming in pain, they thudded to the ground one by one.

But the Haulia weren't done yet. They also cut out the tongues of everyone they downed, in order to stop them from casting spells.

Across the battlefield, nobles and soldiers alike were crippled and detongued as they struggled to recover from the effects of the flashbangs. Any who tried to cast magic were beheaded instead.

Amidst the slaughter, there was a single clash of metal against metal. Somehow, unbelievably, Gahard had managed to repel the assassins who had come for him, even though both his sight and hearing were impaired.

The two Haulia who had engaged him stared at him in awe. And Gahard, picking up on their momentary lapse of concentration, went

on the offensive. He stomped the ground in front of him so hard that shockwaves rippled out.

“Ah!”

“Ngh!”

The two Haulia lost their balance and stumbled backward. Even though Gahard couldn't see or hear anything, he was still able to slash at the two of them with impeccable accuracy. His sword lashed out so fast that it appeared to be bending like a whip. The two Haulia crossed their dual shortswords in front of them in an attempt to block the high speed slashes. However, while Hajime's expertly crafted blades were strong enough to withstand the emperor's attacks, their wielders weren't. The two Haulia were blown away by the force of his slashes.

The moment the two of them were sent flying, another hail of arrows assailed Gahard. Another unit of Haulia had been waiting in the wings with loaded crossbows. Unfortunately for them, Gahard was ready and waiting.

“Blow it all away, Wind Wall!” Despite the short incantation, Gahard was able to summon a wind wall strong enough to deflect all the arrows.

“Pierce through, Fireball!” With another condensed incantation, Gahard summoned a dozen fireballs and sent them hurtling in the direction the arrows had come from.

Luckily, the Haulia had relocated the moment they'd finished firing. Had they been any slower though, they would have been burnt to a crisp.

Both the speed of Gahard's activation and the force of his spells were ridiculous. Moreover, even though the Haulia were hiding their presence, Gahard could somehow sense where they were. Plus, his swordsmanship was so precise and powerful that it took everything the Haulia had to defend against a single slash.

In fact, they were so shaken that for a moment their fear leaked through, and they stopped masking their presence. Gahard's eyelids cracked open, and though he still couldn't see properly, there was a feral gleam in his eyes.

“Found you!” He whirled around. Though there was no way he should have been able to see the rabbitmen hiding in the darkness, Gahard's eyes were staring right at them. Their terror had betrayed their location.

“Burn through everything— Fireball!” Gahard shot off another barrage of fireballs. He then turned in the other direction and flung some toward another group of Haulia hiding within the shadows. At the same time, he snapped his fingers. All of the fireballs he'd sent to the ceiling for illumination contracted briefly, then exploded in a

storm of heat and sound.

Par and the other snipers, who'd been providing covering fire, were sent hurtling toward the ground. The other fireballs he'd shot off narrowly missed their targets, but the resulting explosions still sent the Haulia flying. And, while the shockwaves didn't do much damage, they left the Haulia unbalanced, and forced them to find a new vantage point to snipe from.

"Dancing breeze, carry my will— Breeze Breath!" With the time he'd bought, Gahard cast yet another spell.

Breeze Breath was a support-oriented wind spell. It allowed the caster to amplify sounds using the power of wind, or to carry specific noises over long distances. By amplifying the sounds the Haulia were making, Gahard was able to cover for his impaired hearing. In a sense, he'd taken the Sense Presence skill and cast a magical version of it. Still, amplifying sounds made them more muddled, and it took a lot of concentration to pinpoint locations using them alone. Normally, it wasn't suited for close quarters combat. That was why it was usually reserved for spies and scouts who wished to relay information.

"Taaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

"Whoa!"

"Ngh!"

Gahard swung his blade so fast that afterimages followed in its wake. The Haulia groaned in pain, just barely avoiding fatal blows by manipulating their presence at the last second. However, they knew they wouldn't hold out for long.

Since Gahard was using Breeze Breath, the Haulia's stealth abilities weren't nearly as effective. The subtle sounds they made as they moved were clearly being transmitted to him.

Though Breeze Breath wasn't nearly as helpful in locating people as Sense Presence was, Gahard made up for it with audacity and grit. He plowed forward doggedly, and continued slashing with increasing accuracy.

This was the man who stood at the top of Hoelscher. The strongest warrior among a nation of warriors. The emperor who had devoted his heart and soul to the pursuit of strength. Upon witnessing his overwhelming strength, the Haulia responded rather audaciously.

"Bring it."

"We'll cut you to ribbons."

Not a single one was cowering. Instead, they were all sporting fearless grins. Their eyes, barely visible through the slits in their masks, glimmered with a dangerous light. Each and every one of the Haulia was still raring to go.

If they couldn't rely on stealth, then they'd use their coordination to take Gahard down. The Haulia all leaped into action at once, as if

they were a single organism. By constantly staying in motion, and perfectly synchronizing their attacks, they were able to pressure even Gahard.

“Kukuku, now that’s the kind of fighting spirit I like to see! Isn’t that right, Haulia!” Gahard laughed boisterously as he fended off the Haulia’s consecutive attacks with his unique sword techniques. It appeared he already knew his mysterious assailants were the Haulia.

However, the Haulia didn’t react at all to Gahard’s declaration. The only thing on their mind was taking down the enemy in front of them.

“Come on, what’s wrong? So scared you can’t even talk!?” His hearing, aided by the spell, was slowly beginning to return.

At his provocation, the Haulia with the most bloodlust in his eyes, Cam, brandished his twin shortswords and spoke calmly.

“A battlefield has no need for words. If you have something to say, then speak it with your sword.”

“Hah, now you’re talking.”

Sparks danced in the darkness as the two of them unleashed a flurry of blows.

On his own, Cam was clearly no match for Gahard, but he had the highly coordinated Haulia behind him. Both sides continued vying for supremacy, but neither was able to land a decisive blow.

Seconds passed, then minutes. The nobles laying on the ground fervently prayed for their leader to come out ahead while simultaneously cursing the guards for not coming. Though they’d had their tendons severed and their tongues cut out, they were still conscious.

And, as they watched the battle progress, seeds of fear began sprouting within their hearts. The Haulia’s power was beyond anything they had expected from rabbitmen. Not only that, but the Haulia almost seemed to be winning. “Ah! What the—!? My body just —” Gahard staggered, and his movements dulled.

In response, the Haulia rushed forward instantly, as if they’d been waiting for that exact moment. He somehow managed to repel them all still, but the Haulia had been expecting that as well. After he repelled the close-combat fighters, a barrage of arrows rained down on him.

“Guh!”

One of them pierced Gahard in the calf, and he went down to one knee. The moment he saw an opening, Cam rushed in and swung down with his shortswords. While Gahard managed to block the first, the second sliced through the ligaments in his arm, forcing him to drop his sword. He quickly pulled something out of his pocket with his one good hand, but two Haulia leaped past him and sliced through

the Artifact he was attempting to activate. At the same time, another barrage of arrows sliced through his arms and legs.

“Ngh!”

Though he didn’t scream, the intense pain made his body go limp. He slumped forward, then with a resounding thud, fell unconscious onto the ground.

Silence filled the hall. Everyone was at an utter loss for words. Of course most of them had had their tongues ripped out, but even if they hadn’t they wouldn’t have been able to say anything.

After all, even if they couldn’t see clearly in the darkness, everyone knew. The truth hammered itself into their minds, leaving them paralyzed. The Hoelscher Empire’s emperor... had lost. That was the moment that the empire, the strongest nation in the Northern Continent, was defeated by the weakest race of all.

Let us rewind time to a short while ago.

“Hurry! Something serious is going down at the party! We need to reach His Majesty’s side as soon as possible!” A panicked voice echoed down one of the castle’s corridors. The owner of the voice was the captain of the imperial guard’s third squad, Grid Half. He pounded down the corridor, twenty of his men following close behind him.

When the lights had gone out in the ballroom, Grid and his men had been guarding the royal treasury. Hoelscher’s treasury happened to be located deep underground. Thanks to that, Grid and his men had been spared the horror of being assassinated like the men up above. They had been doing their rounds when Grid’s magical alarm had begun to ring. He’d hurriedly gathered his men and led them back to the ground floor.

The magical alarm Grid had corresponded to one of the many magic tools Gahard kept on his person. All it did when activated was change the color of every magical alarm linked to it, so it couldn’t be used to convey complex messages. However, the fact that the emperor himself had activated it meant that something serious was going on. Especially since the color he’d chosen was the order for an emergency assembly. Furthermore, the eerie silence that seemed to have engulfed the castle told Grid that the emperor was in grave danger.

“Captain, what’s going on!? Where are all the other units!? How come no one else has responded!?”

Indeed, no matter where they looked, there didn’t seem to be anyone else. Even though the entire castle guard should have been responding to the emergency assembly call.

Feeling uneasy, Grid replied.

“I don’t know, but we need to hurry! These orders came straight from the emperor!”

His squad crossed the silent castle courtyard. As they marched further into the castle, they started meeting up with a few soldiers who'd been lucky enough to be taking a leak, or eating, or on break when the castle guard had been wiped out. Each one sighed in relief when they saw Grid's squad.

All told, Grid's squad had around 30 men after picking up all the stragglers. They stuck to using the servants' corridors as they made their way to the tower where the ball was being held. The moment they reached the entrance, they were intercepted.

"Good evening, soldiers. It's a wonderful night, wouldn't you say?" A gentle voice cut through the strained atmosphere, and the soldiers came to a halt.

"You're..." Grid looked up in shock, as did the other soldiers.

The service entrance, which was normally filled with servants running in and out, was surprisingly silent. There was just a single girl, dressed in a sky blue dress, standing underneath the room's grand chandelier. A pair of fluffy bunny ears poked out above her head. And, because of how short her skirt was, most of her slender legs were also visible. Her pale blue hair fanned out behind her and she grinned at the stunned soldiers.

Rabbitmen were prized for their looks, which was why they were coveted as sex slaves, but this one was even prettier than most. When Shea realized Grid was one of the soldiers in the group, she started trembling in anticipation. She was going to enjoy making him suffer.

"Tch... I don't have time to play with you. Come on men, let's go." Though Grid still held a grudge, he was a soldier first and foremost. One didn't rise to become a commander of a thousand men without knowing what took priority on the battlefield. He ignored Shea and tried to dash past her.

But before he could, he was stopped.

"Fufufufufu... Ahahahahahahaha!" Unable to keep it bottled in any longer, Shea burst out laughing.

"What's so fu—"

"I can't believe I got so lucky! To think you of all people would be one of the stragglers!"

"What are you talking about?"

"You have no idea how happy I am to see you."

Normally, any man would have loved to hear those words from Shea. However, Grid didn't seem the least bit pleased. In fact, he almost seemed afraid.

"Right now, my family's in the middle of a very important battle. I won't let anyone interfere. If you insist on going, you'll have to get through me."

"Captain, there's no time to waste. Just ignore her, we have far

more pressing matters to deal with!” One of the soldiers shouted impatiently. He clearly thought Shea was bluffing. He stepped forward, itching to reach Gahard as fast as possible. Truly, his loyalty truly was commendable. Unfortunately for him, Shea wasn’t going to let him pass.

“Like I said, if you want to get in, you’ll have to go through me.” With that, Shea vanished.

A second later, there was a thunderous boom. Grid and the others slowly turned toward the source of the sound.

The soldier who’d stepped forward had been sent flying. The boom had been the sound of him crashing into the wall. Turning back, Grid and the others saw Shea standing a few meters away from her original position, her fist outstretched. It didn’t seem as though she’d put any force behind the blow. On top of that she was a rabbitman, and a weak-looking one at that. And yet, just by casually throwing her fist out she’d sent a fully armored soldier flying faster than the eye could follow.

The remaining soldiers gulped. Grid was so shocked he didn’t even notice that he gulped with them. *This is impossible.*

Still smiling, Shea spoke up once more.

“Why do you think I’m standing here all on my own? Outside the only entrance to the ballroom?”

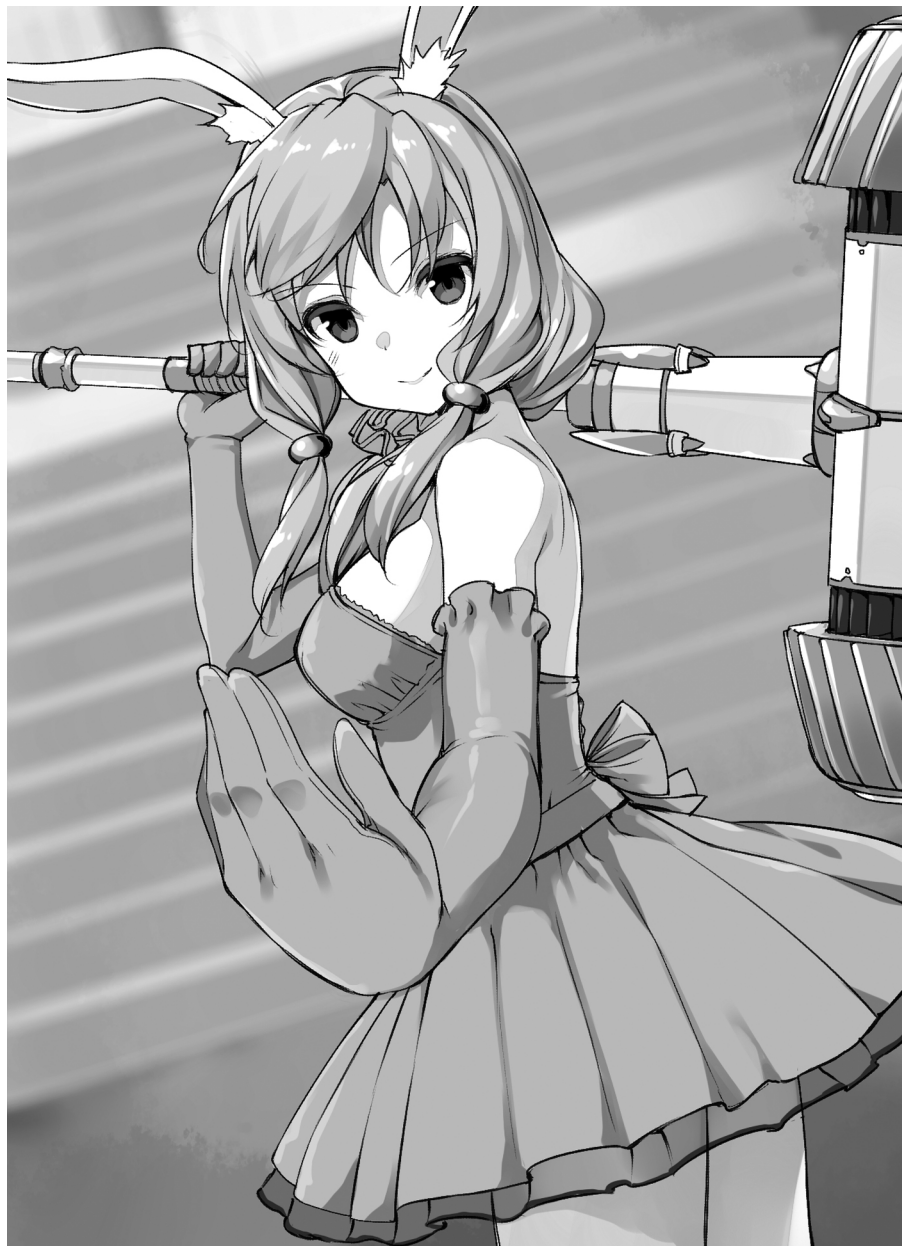
It was a rhetorical question, of course. One look at the soldier sprawled on the ground behind them made it obvious she was here to crush anyone who tried to get in.

The Haulia had known that no matter how thorough they were, they wouldn’t be able to kill all of the palace’s guards. But even a single platoon of guards could tip the scales in the empire’s favor, so they had decided their strongest member would need to guard the entrance.

Naturally, that would have been Shea, the chief’s daughter.

The ring on Shea’s finger began to glow. Grid and the others watched as a massive warhammer suddenly materialized above Shea’s head. It fell into her outstretched hand with a satisfying clunk. With a single flick of her wrist, she twirled it around in her hands. That simple action sent a powerful gust blowing toward the soldiers, who were forced a few steps back.

“Since it’s you I’m up against, I’ll let you know my name. I’m Shea. Shea Haulia. The monster you failed to capture all those months ago,” Shea said with pride, then shouldered her vicious warhammer. She held out her free hand and beckoned provocatively to the soldiers.



The meaning was clear. She was offering to take them all on at once. A vein bulged in Grid's forehead.

"Monster, huh? Big words for a rascally rabbit."

Sure, she's a little different from the usual rabbitman, but she's still just one of them. Beastmen couldn't even use magic, and she was from the weakest beastman race of all. It wounded Grid's pride that he'd let one of them intimidate him.

"Listen up, you bastards! The emperor's calling for us! Let's slaughter this worthless bunny girl and rush to his aid! She may be strong, but she's still just a shitty beastman. Bring her down with magic!"

Grid's men began chanting at once. A few of them broke off from the group and charged Shea to keep her occupied.

Shea curled her fingers into a fist and pointed her thumb down at the floor as they attacked her.

"I'll grind you all into rabbit food!" she said, then leaped forward, destroying the floor with the force of her jump. Grid's vanguard was blown away by the resulting shockwave. Before the rearguard had even gotten one word out of their mouths, Shea was standing before them.

"Ah!?"

Two members of the rearguard looked up in awe. A second later, the upper half of their bodies went flying. Shea had swung Drucken so fast that it had actually cut them in half.

The shockwaves that followed in the wake of her swing crushed the internal organs of another three soldiers. By the time the dead men's blood started falling back to the ground, Shea had already moved on to her next targets. The members of the vanguard she'd blown away before.

"Shi—"

"What the hell just—"

Before they could finish, Drucken slammed into them, turning their heads into pinballs. Drenched in the blood of his men, Grid hastily barked out orders.

"Spread out! Don't clump together!"

It was because they were sticking so close together that Shea could kill multiple enemies with each swing. Grid realized that and instantly changed tactics. The soldiers spread out and surrounded Shea from all sides.

"Raaah!" Though Shea's battle cries sounded cute, there was nothing cute about the way Drucken flattened soldiers like pancakes. She threw her hammer at another guard, crushing him against the wall. Grid and the others felt a glimmer of hope when they saw her

throw her weapon, but they were soon disappointed. Shea swung her arm, and Drucken flew back toward her.

Upon closer inspection, Grid realized that she was still holding the hammer's handle, which was connected to its head by a fine chain. By detaching the head from the handle, Shea could now transform Drucken into a flail.

"Now's our chance!"

"Dieeeeeee!"

Two of the imperial soldiers rushed forward, hoping to bring Shea down before Drucken's head returned to her, but Shea simply pulled one of the triggers on Drucken's handle. A second later, a series of loud bangs came from Drucken's head. Multiple shotgun rounds shot out of the flat side of the hammer and turned the two charging soldiers into pincushions.

Following that, Shea lightly leaped over their lifeless bodies, and caught Drucken's head in midair. She transformed Drucken into bombardment mode and fired another salvo of shotgun shells. Five more soldiers were turned into puddles of blood and flesh.

"Take this, you monster!"

Finally, some of the soldiers finished casting their spells. Ten Crimson Javelins sped toward Shea. Thanks to the empire's strict training, they all fired in tandem. Shea saw the flaming spears hurtling toward her and screamed in utter joy.

"Piece of cake!"

Spinning in a circle, Shea built up plenty of centrifugal force and created a mini-tornado around her. The localized storm struck down all of the javelins heading her way.

"No way!"

"That's impossible!"

The one advantage humans had over beastmen was magic. And that advantage had been nullified with unbelievable ease. The two soldiers that cried out in surprise were turned into corpses seconds later. Two fist-sized balls of steel smashed into their faces, shattering their skulls. Shea had pulled them out of her Treasure Trove and batted them at the two soldiers with Drucken. Another two soldiers had their bones crushed as Shea leaped into range and slammed them into the ground.

Not even a minute had passed since the start of the battle. And yet, half the empire's soldiers lay dead on the ground.

"Like hell I'll let you get away with this!" Grid roused himself with a yell and slashed at Shea. As expected, the commander was on a different level than his men. Thanks to his body strengthening, he moved faster than the eye could follow. The fact that one of his men followed up with an attack of his own also proved that he'd trained

his squad well.

However, that alone wasn't nearly enough to scratch this overpowered rabbit.

"Wha—"

She had blocked Grid's slash by trapping it between the spike of her heel and its sole. With the sword still trapped in her shoe, Shea twirled around. Grid was dragged around with her, and his stance crumbled. A second later, he felt something slam into the pit of his stomach. Shea had punched him.

"Gah." Grid doubled up and staggered a few steps backward. Shea then followed up with Hajime's signature front kick, which made him cough up blood as he was sent flying back into the wall. However, Shea had held back enough that he didn't die. Barely conscious, Grid could only watch as his men were picked off one after another.

In another thirty seconds, his entire squad had been exterminated. Shea turned and walked over to Grid, heels clacking against the floor. Despite the bloodbath she'd caused, there wasn't a single drop of blood on her.

"W-W-Wait... please..."

Blood dribbled from his mouth as Grid begged for his life. The creature standing before him was so far beyond his comprehension that he could only tremble in fear.

What the hell did I let slip between my fingers back then. He'd first encountered the Haulia loitering around outside the sea of trees. At the time, he thought he'd lucked into a great haul. In order to paralyze them with fear, he'd started killing off the clan's men and elderly. He had expected the rabbitmen, weak as they were, to surrender quickly. And so, he'd herded them into the Reisen Gorge, and then planned on sending his soldiers in after them once they'd exhausted themselves.

Personally, he'd just wanted the beauty with light-blue hair. He had so been looking forward to capturing her and raping her in front of all his men. *Did I really think I could handle someone like her?*

Shea grabbed him by the breastplate and lifted him up. Though his armor wasn't the hardest steel, it was still sturdy iron. Despite that, Shea's grip easily crushed the metal, molding it into an easy to grip shape.

"I-I'm begging you. Please don't kill me! O-Oh yeah! In return, I'll tell you where I took all those rabbitmen I captured. If you kill me, you'll never--"

"I have nothing more to say to the likes of you." Shea cut him off and raised him over her head. Her resentment and anger hadn't abated in the slightest, which was probably why she'd unconsciously held back earlier. She wouldn't let the man who'd caused her so much

grief and suffering have an easy death.

That being said, she refused to let her desire for revenge consume her. As a Haulia, as one of Hajime's comrades, she couldn't let herself stoop so low.

I'll end it all with this last hit! Shea Haulia, the monster born in the sea of trees, needed to settle things in order to move forward with her friends. And so, she flung Grid into the air and brandished Drucken. Then, with a fearless grin, she let out some parting words.

"I'll send you to the moon, you bastard!"

"Sto—"

Thunk! Grid crashed through the entryway's skylight and vanished into the night sky. Looking up, all Shea could see was the crescent moon grinning back at her.

He was heading toward the moon, so maybe I actually did send him all the way there. Shea swung Drucken one more time, making a breeze whip up in the entryway.

"Guys... I hope this was enough to avenge you." Memories of her departed family members flashed through her mind. They had been willing to throw away even their homes for her sake. Shea closed her eyes and offered a silent prayer.

After a few minutes, her rabbit ears picked up on the sound of footsteps heading her way. It appeared Grid's squad wasn't the only one Cam and the others had missed.

Shea's eyes snapped open and she grinned once more. The imperial guards flung the door open, but faltered when they saw the carnage waiting for them inside. Shea puffed her chest out proudly and declared her intent.

"Are you ready to die? Just so you know... this bunny girl's way stronger than you think!"

The monster of Haltina continued racking up kills for quite some time, until Hajime finally sent her a message via telepathy.

"Tch, poisoned arrows, huh?" Gahard's pained voice echoed across the silent party hall. The other members of the empire were still too stunned to do anything. Their emperor, the symbol of their nation's might, had fallen. One of the Haulia strode up to Gahard and fed him medicine that restored his hearing and eyesight. He'd need his senses for the negotiations to come.

"Hmph, that dosage was enough to leave monsters completely paralyzed. I'm impressed you held out so long."

"Curses, so that was your plan from the start..."

The Haulia confiscated all the artifacts Gahard had hidden inside his clothes, leaving him utterly defenseless.

Since his hearing and sight had returned, Gahard was able to see

the elaborate trap the Haulia had laid for him, but before he could say anything more, a solitary beam of light poured down on him. The Haulia were using their flashlights as a makeshift spotlight in order to emphasize to the guests that their emperor had fallen. Upon seeing the defeated emperor, a panicked voice called out from the corner of the room,

“Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What on earth is this!? Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What’s going on!? E-E-E-E-Explain yourself, Nagumo-san! J-J-J-J-Just what did you do!?”

“Calm down and watch, Princess. This is the climax.”

When the raid had started, Hajime and the others had evacuated to a corner of the room so as not to get in the way of the Haulia’s fight. Liliana had been with Baius, but Yue had teleported her to the others using spatial magic. While she’d still been confused about the sudden teleportation, the lights had gone out and all she could hear was the sound of fighting. Now, suddenly, the emperor was lying defeated on the ground. Liliana might have been good at keeping a poker face, but even she couldn’t hide her shock.

Kouki and the others were shaken too, but for a different reason. A few of the empire’s nobles had died in the attack, and their deaths had left Kouki, Shizuku, Suzu, and Ryutarou pale. They silently looked at the corpses with pained grimaces.

However, they knew this was the only chance for the beastmen to put an end to their centuries of slavery, and that the very fate of the Haulia rested on the outcome of this battle. Though they found the bloodshed hard to stomach, they held their tongues. Or rather, they had no choice but to hold their tongues. As there was a certain someone who would beat them senseless if they tried to speak out and interfere with Cam and the Haulia’s battle. Hajime hadn’t taken his eyes off Kouki since the fighting started.

“Now then, Gahard D. Hoelscher. Do you understand why we’ve let you live?”

“Hmph, I take it you’ve got demands? Well, spit them out already.”

“How unfortunate. It appears you still don’t understand the position you’re in, Gahard. That’s one mark.”

Cam’s voice reverberated throughout the hall, admonishing Gahard for his haughty attitude. Gahard was about to learn that the consequence for his defiance was the lives of his countrymen.

Another spotlight shined down a few meters away from him, right on top of one of the nobles who’d had their tendons cut and their tongue removed.

A hand reached out from the darkness, grabbed the noble by the hair, pulled him up, and mercilessly slit his throat.

“You bastards!”

“Another mark.”

The only response to Gahard’s angry yell and the guests’ screams was Cam’s mechanical voice telling him he’d made a mistake once more.

Yet another spotlight shone down, displaying the beheading of a different noble.

“Vesta! Don’t get ahead of yourselves, you little--”

“Another mark.”

Vesta had been one of Gahard’s close associates. However, his anger at the loss of his friend worked against him in that particular case, as Cam once again beheaded another one of the empire’s nobles in response to Gahard’s outburst.

“.....” This time, Gahard held his tongue. He glared at the darkness in front of him, his eyes brimming with pure hatred. However, Cam remained unconcerned.

“That’s right, now you understand what it means to be the defeated. I would choose your words carefully, Gahard. The lives of everyone in this room depend on you making the right decisions.”

A hand reached out from the darkness and placed a necklace over his head. There was a vivid crimson ruby dangling from its fine gold chain.

“That is the Necklace of Vows. It is an artifact that will force you to keep any pledge you speak. Break any of your promises, and this necklace will kill you. Once activated it will bind not only you, but those linked to you by blood as well. If you renege on your word, they die with you.”

Cam briefly explained to Gahard that he had his family in their custody as well. Gahard grit his teeth so hard that it looked like they might break.

The Necklace of Vows was an artifact created with spirit magic. It bound a person’s soul to the promises they made. More specifically, it carved the words a person said into their soul. If the person wearing the necklace ever did anything to annul those promises, or attempted to take the necklace off, their soul was destroyed. And, as it affected anyone who’s soul was linked to the wearer’s by blood, all of Gahard’s family needed to keep wearing their necklaces forever too, or they died.

In other words, the artifact forced Gahard and his family to uphold their pledges until the day they died. Incidentally, it only worked through direct blood ties, so relatives by marriage weren’t affected.

“Pledge... you say?”

“There are four simple things I want you to agree to. First, to

release all beastmen slaves. Second, to never invade Haltina again. Third, to forever stop taking beastmen as slaves, and to treat them as equals. Fourth, to turn the above three into imperial laws. Do you understand? If you do, then say ‘I hereby swear as Hoelscher’s representative to uphold these principles.’ By doing so, you will activate the artifact.”

“And if I refuse?”

“Then the imperial family shall cease to exist. And until the empire decides to negotiate, we will continue killing your officers and officials one by one. We will terrorize your empire until we as a race are destroyed. No man, woman, or child will be safe so long as we draw breath. If killing your soldiers isn’t enough, we’ll move on to assassinating their families as well.”

“Don’t underestimate the empire, rabbitmen. This nation won’t crumble just because I’m dead. If you kill me here, my soldiers will raise an army tens of thousands strong and raze your precious sea of trees to the ground. Surely you realize this too? If we devoted all our forces to it, crushing Verbergen is a very real possibility. The only reason we haven’t is because...”

“You wouldn’t be able to hunt for slaves if you killed us all, correct?”

“Looks like you get it. There’s still time to repent, though. Even if you did borrow that boy’s strength, I must admit that taking control of the imperial palace in such a short time is impressive. Not to mention your outstanding combat skills... It would be a shame to have to kill you. Why not join my army instead? I promise to treat you well.”

“Out of the question. Considering how you’ve treated beastmen in the past, we would be fools to trust your word. It’s because we can’t that we prepared these necklaces.”

“Then all you’ll get from me is war. I’ll never agree to those terms.” Gahard smirked triumphantly, but Cam’s flat voice didn’t waver.

“I see. That’s another mark, Gahard.”

Yet another beam of light came down. This time—

“Let me go! Do you know who I am, you filthy beasts!? I’ll kill you, you fucking bastards! I’ll you all! You hear— Gah!” It was focused on Baius. The nobles in the room gasped as the future emperor’s head was neatly sliced off his shoulders.

“.....”

“So that was your successor, the next in line for the throne. What a worthless, loudmouthed, pathetic man.”

“I believe I already told you. Even if you kill my family, I will never submit. Go ahead, do your worst. You’ll regret incurring the wrath of the empire.”

Despite seeing his son murdered before his eyes, Gahard's expression didn't change. There was no way to tell what he was really thinking, but at the very least he didn't allow himself to look shaken.

"Unfazed even after seeing your son die? Well, I suppose you never loved your children to begin with."

The people of the empire valued strength above all, so it was possible they didn't put any stock in familial ties. In fact, it seemed that Gahard had cared more about the death of his friend than he did about his son's.

In response to Cam's words, Gahard sniffed dismissively.

"If you understand, then quit wasting my time."

"Now now, don't be so impatient. Are you sure you have no desire to make the pledge? Do you insist on persecuting beastmen and chasing down the Haulia no matter the consequences?"

"Stop making me repeat myself."

"I see... How unfortunate. Delta 1, this is Alpha 1. Do it."

Gahard looked up in confusion. Those words made no sense to him, but the massive explosion he heard a few seconds later made everything clear.

"Tch... What'd you just do!?"

"Oh, nothing much. Just blew up the slave overseers' barracks."

"Blew up? You mean..."

"Indeed, there were probably a few people inside... I imagine a few hundred or so of your precious soldiers are dead. All because of you, Gahard."

"You're the one who did this, you bastard!"

"No, Gahard, this is your fault. Your unwise decision caused the deaths of your men. And seeing as you still plan to resist— Delta 1, this is Alpha 1. Next target."

Panicking, Gahard tried to stop Cam.

"Hey, wait, Haulia!"

Another explosion roared in the distance. This time it was much further off. It probably wasn't anywhere in the castle, but somewhere out in the capital.

Gahard forced himself to remain calm and question Cam.

"What did you blow up this time?"

"A hospital."

"You son of a bitch!"

"Fear not. It was just a military hospital. The only people we've killed are soldiers and military doctors. Though of course, we've planted explosives at civilian hospitals, inns, brothels, houses, and even the temporary shelters you set up in the wake of the demon attack. Is there any particular place you'd like us to start with?"

"You'd even harm civilians!? How low will you stoop, Haulia!?"

“You do the same to us beastmen. None of you have any qualms about kidnapping and enslaving innocent women and children. You have no right to talk... Delta, next target.”

“Wait!”

As far as Cam was concerned, everyone in the empire was equally guilty of oppressing and enslaving beastmen. He mercilessly ordered another target to be blown up.

Gahard grit his teeth, worried that Cam might actually have blown up a civilian location this time.

In truth, Cam had only destroyed the drawbridge leading to the castle. Once explosions started occurring in the capital, naturally people would rush to the palace to report it. Cam had wanted to make that impossible before he found the place flooded with troops.

Moreover, his words were half a bluff. He had set plenty more explosives, but none in civilian locations. Cam was willing to go to great lengths, but even he had some pride. He refused to stoop as low as the empire had.

Of course if it became necessary he would resort to slaughtering civilians too, but otherwise he was hoping to get what he wanted through lies and misdirection. That was the resolve the current Haulia had.

“If you won’t agree to our demands, then we have no choice. We’ll send the entire capital to hell along with you. I imagine going down with tens of thousands of your subjects will make a fitting end for your reign, Emperor.”

Looking at it objectively, they weren’t too different from terrorists. Anything for the sake of victory, even underhanded and dirty tactics. One had to wonder what kind of personality the man who’d trained them had... A number of people turned to glare at Hajime, but he ignored them.

Gahard fell silent, torn about what to do next. He wracked his brain for a solution to this predicament, but none came to mind. Cold sweat poured down his handsome face, the first visible sign of how cornered he felt.

But Cam wasn’t about to let up the pressure. The longer Gahard took to decide, the more places he would blow up.

“Delta 1, this is Alpha 1. Ne—”

“Wait!” Gahard hurriedly called out. He slammed his head against the ground a few times in frustration. Then, after letting it all out he looked up and spoke in a tone full of resignation.

“Gah, goddammit! Fine! I lose! I’ll agree to all your damn conditions, so stop blowing up my city!”

“A wise decision. Now, speak the pledge.”

Even after getting his demands met, Cam’s mechanical tone didn’t

change. Gahard grimaced, then slumped in defeat. He turned toward the nobles in the hall and spoke.

“Sorry, guys. They really got us this time. But we’re the ones who said might makes right, and these rabbitmen proved it again by capturing the capital. Our subjects lives’ rest in the palms of their hands, so—”

The remaining nobles grit their teeth in frustration. Gahard burned their resentment into his soul and continued in a loud voice.

“I hereby swear, as Hoelscher’s representative, that I will free all beastmen slaves within the empire! Furthermore, I swear to never invade Haltina or interfere with its politics again! I also swear that the empire will stop persecuting beastmen and taking them as slaves! Any citizen who breaks these rules will be punished according to the laws of the empire! Finally, I swear to codify the above precepts into imperial law!”

As he completed the pledge, the ruby around his neck began to glow.

Lastly, Gahard made one more declaration as emperor.

“If anyone’s got a problem with that, they can take it up with me! If you beat me in a fight, I’ll hand the empire over to you! Then you can do whatever the hell you want!”

In other words, he was effectively saying that if anyone wanted to go back to enslaving beastmen they needed to do it over his dead body. A fitting declaration for the man who respected strength above all.

“Very well, the contract has been made.”

Another spotlight shone down. This one showcased the emperor’s family. They were all wearing the same necklaces as well.

“Unless you wish for your family line to die out, do not renege on your oath.”

“I know, I know.”

“Next, you will make an official announcement tomorrow, and release all the slaves within the capital on the same day.”

“You want me to do it all in one day? Do you have any idea how many slaves we...”

“Next target.”

“Goddammit! Fine, I’ll do it! That’s enough, right!?”

“Make sure to guide the released slaves back to Haltina. Furthermore, Gahard. You will be accompanying us to Verbergen. You need to repeat your oaths in front of Verbergen’s elders.”

“By myself? Won’t the elders just kill me?”

“As I mentioned, we will be accompanying you. Rest assured, no harm will come to you. Besides, it is to our advantage to keep you alive.”

“Haaah, alright. To be honest, I had a feeling something like this might happen when I heard you escaped. Though I didn’t think I’d be done in so badly. Hey, do you have a grudge against me and the empire or something— Hajime Nagumo?” Gahard glared at Hajime, who he had somehow located through the darkness.

However, Hajime said nothing in response. He simply leaned back against the wall and yawned. This was the Haulia’s stage. He had no place saying anything here, and so he acted as if this had nothing to do with him.

Since there still wasn’t much light, Gahard couldn’t make out his expression, but he could still tell Hajime had no intention of answering. The emperor clicked his tongue, and then Cam interjected.

“A word of warning, Gahard. We did indeed receive assistance from our savior and benefactor, but the strength he lent us belongs to us now. If we so wished it, we could infiltrate the capital at any time, and gather all the information we need. Assassinating you in your sleep would take no effort at all. So if you try and circumvent our agreement, know that we can deal with you even without our master’s aid.”

“Belongs to you, huh? Man, I’m jealous. I have no clue how he made such powerful artifacts that even manaless beastmen can use, but...”

Gahard’s frustration was understandable. After all, the biggest reason beastmen were weaker than the other races was because they couldn’t use magic. But now that some of the beastmen had obtained artifacts that could function like magic, that disparity had disappeared.

Gahard wanted to yell at Hajime for upsetting the balance that had been preserved for centuries, but all he could do was curse to himself. *How could you do such a thing!? Don’t you know how this will affect the human nations!?*

However, Hajime hadn’t really provided all that much assistance. He’d just equipped them, and disarmed some of the traps surrounding the imperial palace. And all of that, he’d done using his multipurpose spider golems, the Arachnae.

They worked in a similar manner to his Cross Bits, and he could control multiple spiders at once. One of which had, of course, saved Liliana. The Arachnae were equipped with steel wires, the ability to transmit everything they saw to Hajime’s Demon Eye or solid crystal display, and they also allowed him to remotely transmute things in their vicinity. On top of that, the spider’s legs were hypodermic needles that each contained different poisoned vials. The vials had ranging effects from sleep to paralysis to impotence.

The reason Hajime had looked so out of it ever since entering the

palace was because he'd been concentrating on controlling his Arachnae. It had taken immense concentration to keep them all moving and disarming traps simultaneously. Once he'd finished dismantling most of the palace's defenses, he'd had the Arachnae record every inch of the castle interior and relay the footage back to the Haulia waiting outside the capital. Furthermore, he'd used improved versions of his old telepathy stone to provide the Haulia with the perfect silent communication network.

The way he'd made his artifacts usable even for the manaless Haulia was simple. He'd taken ore that was capable of storing mana and enchanted it with High Speed Mana Regeneration and Mana Discharge. That way, the ore was constantly absorbing mana.

After that, he'd carved unfinished magic circles into each of the artifacts, and left the final piece slightly out of alignment. By sliding the switch on any of them, the circle would be completed, and the properties of the artifact activated.

There was still a lot of design improvements he needed to make, but at least with this he'd succeeded in making artifacts that even the Haulia could use. Furthermore, he'd used the same kind of magic that made Status Plates unique to each individual to ensure that only the Haulia would be able to use his artifacts.

Incidentally, they weren't artifacts he'd created recently. Originally, he had made them for Myu. After all, he had promised to go back and get her someday. And because she was cute, there was no doubt in Hajime's mind that uncouth guys would be all over her. In which case, Myu would need artifacts that could obliterate them for self-defense. Hajime really was just like an overprotective dad. Ironically, his doting had inadvertently caused a revolution in race relations. Had anyone in the empire known that was why their nation had fallen, they would have probably been furious.

"Fear not, Gahard. Only the Haulia were gifted with these artifacts. Verbergen won't be foolish enough to try and invade you after you give them your oaths. In fact, if they were to attempt something so foolish we would turn our blades on them ourselves."

At those words, Gahard realized that the Haulia were an independent force from Verbergen. They had started this fight not for their country's sake, but to improve living conditions for their fellow beastmen. Or well, actually just their fellow rabbitmen, but Gahard didn't know that.

"I see. Alright, I understand now, so hurry up and release me already. If you want everyone freed by tomorrow, then I need to get started now or I won't make it in time."

"Very well. But know that the Haulia will always be watching you. Don't ever forget that."

All of the spotlights turned off, flooding the hall with darkness once more.

“Hajime-san.” Hajime turned to see Shea standing next to him. She’d come back after Hajime had told her via telepathy that the battle was over. Her smile was a little different from usual. As if, for the first time in her life, she truly had no worries. It was so radiant that Hajime was momentarily smitten.

“It’s finally over.”

Hajime wasn’t sure if she meant this battle, or something more. Still, he smiled back and responded.

“I see. You did good.” Hajime hadn’t thought it possible for Shea’s smile to grow any brighter, but he was wrong. Before he could respond, he received a transmission through telepathy.

—Boss, this is Alpha 1. We’ll be pulling out now. We are greatly indebted to you for all of your assistance.

Hajime grinned to himself.

—Don’t worry, I did this for Shea. Besides, it’s not over yet. In fact, the real battle starts here. Don’t let your guard down, guys. There’s definitely a few guys out there who’ll want to keep hunting beastmen even if it means disobeying imperial orders.

—We know, Boss. From the start, we resolved ourselves to keep fighting for as long as it took. This is the path the new and improved Haulia have chosen to walk down.

Upon hearing Cam’s steadfast resolve, Hajime’s grin grew wider.

—Well, you’ve definitely shown me just how determined you are. All of you— Hajime paused for a moment.

—Well done!

That was the first time the Haulia had received heartfelt praise from their beloved boss. The shock of it left their ears pointing straight up and their fur standing on end. It took a few seconds for them to digest what Hajime had just said. But once they did, their joy was like nothing Hajime had seen before.

—

Yeaaah!

A roar of victory rang out. The weakest of the weak, the losers who had been forced to swallow the bitter draft of defeat for centuries, had finally been able to pay their enemies back.

In all honesty, there was still no guarantee the empire would fully comply with their pledge to stop invading Haltina and capturing slaves. Like Hajime had said, there were more than a few people in the empire who would want to keep hunting beastmen even if it meant going against Gahard’s orders. Plus, it was entirely possible that Gahard might find a loophole to get around his pledges.

And so, the Haulia knew too that their fight was just beginning.

Still, at the very least, the oaths they'd forced Gahard to swear meant that the empire wouldn't be attacking Haltina or capturing rabbitmen anytime soon. With the time they'd bought, the Haulia would increase their numbers, sharpen their fangs, and master the arts of assassination and guerrilla warfare. They would grow so strong that even if the empire found a way to break its promise, they'd have a hard time fighting against the Haulia.

The true purpose of this operation hadn't been to end all conflict, but to muzzle the emperor and buy the Haulia enough time to strengthen themselves. And in that respect, they had succeeded. The Haulia, weakest of all beastmen, had won, and decisively at that.

"Fuck! Those bastards just left me like this! Someone, get the lights... Shit, everyone's injured or dead... Actually, wait! Hajime Nagumo, you freaking bastard! Quit playing dumb! I know you're still unharmed, so help me out here!"

Hajime was currently listening to the Haulia's telepathic cheers while he cuddled a teary-eyed Shea. Thanks to his Night Vision skill, he had no trouble spotting Gahard rolling helplessly on the ground. However, he wanted to enjoy listening to the Haulia's celebrations for a while longer.

Incidentally, when Shea had leaped into Hajime's arms, he'd casually thrown Liliana aside. Hajime's callous treatment had brought her back to her senses and she'd collapsed into a sobbing heap muttering "Even though I'm a princess..." over and over. She looked just like a poor girl who'd been dumped by her playboy boyfriend.

"Alright, alright, I'll help..."

Still holding Shea with one hand, Hajime pulled a luminous rock out of his Treasure Trove with the other. He threw it up at the ceiling, where it stopped and started floating. Once it was in place, it started glowing much more intensely, and lit up the room so well it felt like it was noon.

Now that the whole hall was visible, everyone could see just how much of a bloodbath the battle had been. The floors and ceiling were dyed red, and countless freshly severed heads littered the floor. None of the nobles lucky enough to have survived were unscathed. Most had had their tendons cut, and were lying limply on the ground, groaning in pain. Many of the noble ladies had wet themselves in fear. A few of them had been lucky enough to faint from the shock.

Those who were tough enough to have held on to their consciousness screamed in abject terror when they saw Shea's bunny ears and fainted as well. Quite a few of the men wet themselves too when they saw Shea. It appeared the Haulia had succeeded in their secondary goal; the people of the empire were filled with dread whenever they caught sight of a rabbitman.

Hajime, Kouki, and the others stood out as they were the only people in the room who were untouched. The few soldiers who'd fought until the bitter end glared daggers at them. It was obvious the soldiers thought Hajime and the others were the Haulia's accomplices.

"Hey, Hajime Nagumo. Stop flirting and give me a hand here. How cheeky can you get, flirting with a girl, a rabbitman no less, right after what happened?"

"Sorry. It's just that Shea's a weak little bunny girl, and all that fighting really scared her. Poor girl. Those assailants sure were terrifying. It took everything I had just to defend myself." Hajime shivered in an exaggerated manner as he said that.

On the other hand, Shea didn't even bother trying to hide how happy she looked. Gahard trembled in rage, and the mages who'd had their tongues cut out glared daggers at Hajime. Kouki and the others were stunned by how brazen Hajime was acting.

"You impudent little... Either way, you're not hurt, so if you don't have anything against the empire, I'd like you to help heal me and my men. At the very least, you could call for help, couldn't you?"

"I don't mind healing you guys, but I get the feeling your men'll rush at me the moment I do... As long as you don't mind me killing anyone who attacks, I'm fine with helping out."

"Of course I mind! Hey, you guys! Don't you dare lay a hand on that monster! I don't want any of you dying a worthless death trying to get revenge against that cheeky, Haulia-sympathizing, womanizing son of a bitch!"

The nobles all closed their eyes in frustration. They knew Gahard was right in ordering them to survive, but they didn't like it one bit. Hajime narrowed his eyes in irritation, but Gahard cut him off.

"Look, even if they wished they could kill you, none of my men are stupid enough to fling themselves into the jaws of death. Even if they are, I won't let them. Some of them are in critical condition, so please, Hajime Nagumo. Save them."

"Well if you're sure they won't attack, I guess it's fine. Kaori, you're up."

"Yep, just leave it to me! Aetherflow!"

Kaori instantly cast the strongest healing spell without any incantation or magic circle. Waves of shimmering mana spread out across the ballroom. In less than a second, everyone had been fully healed.

"I give up. Somehow, even your healers are monsters."

Gahard looked tired as he watched Kaori's godly healing. Everyone was dumbfounded by how quickly their wounds had disappeared. Instantly casting the strongest healing spell in the world should have been impossible.

With the exception of the ladies who were still unconscious, and the nobles who were still too stunned to react, everyone in the room rushed to Gahard's side and formed a protective circle around him. They all eyed Hajime warily.

"I just said *don't* fight him. If you so much as direct your fighting spirit at him, he'll slaughter us all, so stop!"

"But, Your Majesty, they're clearly in league with the assailants!"

"Exactly! They even killed the crown prince... We can't just let them go!"

"Our reputation would be ruined if we did!"

Gahard's men argued vehemently with him. They were itching to fight. Sure, they had caught a glimpse of Kaori's true strength when she'd healed them all instantly, but none of them knew anything about Hajime's. Quite a few of them had, however, seen Gahard's duel with Kouki. The fact that Gahard had beaten Kouki back then was the foundation for their confidence.

In response, Gahard sighed sadly and aimed his anger toward them. His men groaned and staggered backward, all will to fight lost. Gahard looked across the room, sucked in a huge breath, and exclaimed something in a loud, dignified voice.

"Quit causing a scene! I said it before and I'll say it again, I won't allow any of you to die a dog's death here! Listen up, that white-haired kid with the eyepatch is a genuine monster! The kind of monster who took down an entire army without breaking a sweat. He's so strong I probably wouldn't be able to even scratch him. I won't ask you to submit to him, but if you're real men of the empire, then stop throwing a tantrum and accept that he's stronger than you! Might makes right, remember?"

Both the soldiers and the nobles stiffened in the face of his will.

"That goes for the Haulia, too. Those bastards were supposed to be the weakest, but they trained until they were strong enough to challenge us. The fact that they led us around the nose means we were really the weak ones! I don't plan on letting things end like this, and I'm sure those rabbitmen know that too, but... accept it for now. This time, we lost. And the losers have to respect the winner's wishes. That's the number one rule of the empire! If you still can't accept it, then bring your complaints to me! Beat me in a fight and force me to admit I'm wrong, just like they did!"

Gahard's voice reverberated across the room. The more weak-willed among the nobles couldn't even meet Gahard's gaze, while his soldiers and those who'd fought with him bowed their heads reluctantly. Among them all, only Gahard had actually kept fighting for any length of time. He was both their emperor, and the strongest among them. Naturally, his words carried weight.

As the ballroom fell silent once more, Hajime nodded in satisfaction.

“Perfect, glad to see everything’s settled.”

Naturally, everyone in the room turned to glare at Hajime. Their gazes spoke more eloquently than any words ever could. “You have no right to say that, you cursed brat!”

The repercussions of that day were felt throughout the capital.

The next morning, Gahard issued an imperial decree stating that all beastmen slaves had to be freed immediately, and that enslaving beastmen was henceforth forbidden. It didn’t matter whether they were owned by individuals or slave traders, the government would not allow anyone to keep beastmen. Naturally there was much confusion, and plenty of people refused to comply. Hordes of citizens crowded the palace gates, demanding an explanation.

Eventually, Gahard walked out onto the castle’s balcony where his people could see him and shouted in a somewhat strained voice.

“The reason for this sudden decree is because I received an oracle from our hallowed creator, Ehit! Behold, citizens of the empire! Lord Ehit has sent us his apostles, the hero and his friends!”

Countless beams of light rained from the sky, and an angel with silver wings descended onto the balcony next to Gahard. Shimmering silver feathers floated down around her. Ripples of pure white light, created through a combination of spirit magic and restoration magic, spread out over the capital. The sublime divinity of it all awed the anger out of people.

Once Kaori had finished her performance, Kouki walked out and held his Holy Sword aloft. It appeared to be glowing even more than usual.

“Freeing the beastmen shall lead our glorious empire to far greater heights! Such is what was written in the vision I received from Lord Ehit! I know many of you are confused by this sudden declaration, but fear not! Those who have lost slaves shall be fully compensated from the imperial treasury! I believe that your patriotism and piety can see us through these turbulent times!”

Silver feathers, the mark of a true Apostle of God, fell among the gathered crowd. Those who happened to pick up one were instantly converted, and started cheering for the emperor and the hero.

Some of the citizens, however, were still worried if “fully compensated” really meant they would get all their money back, but only Gahard could alleviate those concerns.

“Well, good luck, Emperor.” Hajime called out to Gahard from inside the room connecting to the balcony. Yue and Tio were standing next to him. Kaori was still floating outside as part of the spectacle.

The earlier beams of light had been created by one of Hajime's artifacts. And naturally, Gahard's speech had been written by him as well.

Gahard had informed all of his chief officers and ministers about the situation last night. Most of them had been present at the ball, so it didn't take long to get everyone on board.

First, they'd needed a way to inform all the citizens. After that, they needed a place to gather all the capital's slaves. Gahard still had some more time to free all the slaves in the empire's outlying cities, but he needed to get everyone in the capital out by the end of the day, or his head would fly off.

Knowing that their emperor's life depended on them, the empire's top brass moved swiftly. However, they soon ran into a problem. They had no good way of convincing the people to abide by their decision. Sure, private slave owners might not be affected too terribly, but the slave traders would be ruined if their assets were seized all at once. Chances were they would riot if the empire tried to destroy their livelihood. And if that happened, some of the slaves would even get hurt. Which again, would lead to Gahard's head flying off.

Gahard had been at his wits' end when Hajime had come in with a smile and offered a solution.

"If you're out of ideas, then just pin it all on Ehit." Hajime had then outlined his plan to make it sound like it was all Ehit's will. He'd make the speech more convincing by using Kouki and Kaori to make it look like the Apostle of God really had come down and graced the empire with their divine silver feathers.

None of the empire's citizens suspected that the Apostle of God's feathers were actually deadly weapons that could be controlled at will.

The healing spell Kaori had bathed the capital with had not only soothed the hearts of the citizens, but also healed the minds and bodies of the beastmen slaves who had suffered long years of enslavement. While the citizens were all gathered in front of the palace, imperial soldiers went around herding the beastmen to the ruins of the coliseum so they could remove all their collars.

Gahard watched for a while longer to make sure everything was going smoothly. After a few minutes he turned back to Hajime and grumbled.

"I take it all back, you're not just any damned brat. You're the devil!" Kouki, Ryutarou, Suzu, Shizuku, and even Yue and Tio all nodded in agreement.

As all of the soldiers stationed in the capital were assisting in the beastmen emancipation, it didn't take very long before they were freed from their shackles. The thousands of beastmen were still in

shock, unable to comprehend what was going on. Even if they had, they wouldn't have believed it anyway. Dumbfounded, they meekly followed Kouki out of the capital.

Even after they passed through the city's gates, they kept glancing fearfully backward. Most of them were convinced that this was some new twisted game of the empire. That the moment they tried to run they'd be chased down and captured again. But then, something happened that blew that thought out of their minds.

A massive ship descended from the sky. It was Fernir, but it now had a giant gondola attached to it.

As the beastmen stared up in wonder, a single bunny girl leaned out over the ship's railing and waved. The girl, Shea, shouted the words the beastmen had been longing to hear, but hadn't dared to hope they would.

"Everyooooooooooooone! We're here to save you! It's time to go back home to Verbergen!"

They'd had their wounds healed, their shackles removed, been led out of the capital by the hero, been greeted by some strange ship, and on that ship stood a member of their own race. Though they could scarce believe it, all the evidence suggested that they really were being freed.

After a moment of silence, the beastmen broke out in wild cheers.

"Wooo!" The earth shook from the force of their voices. Everyone hugged the person closest to them as they burst into tears.

"Go back home, huh...?" Hajime watched the proceedings from the bridge, through his crystal display. He had an odd expression on his face, one that was hard to describe in words. It was hard to tell whether it was envy, sympathy, or something else entirely. Regardless, it was a very human expression.

He suddenly felt someone take hold of his hand. Hajime turned to see Yue looking gently up at him. He smiled at her, then focused on lowering Fernir's drawbridge so the beastmen could get on.

Behind him, Kaori, Tio, and even Shizuku watched him with warm smiles on their faces.



Epilogue

A despondent silence hung over Garland, the country of demons. Men and women of all ages conversed in hushed whispers, discussing the predicament their nation was in. The future of Garland looked bleak. It was to the point where people frequently shot worried glances at the castle, praying that those living within had a plan to save them.

The source of their despair was, of course, the results of the demon army's latest operation. The assault on Heiligh and the Divine Mountain had been the most important battle of the war. And it had ended in failure.

No, failure was too soft a word to describe what had happened. It had been a complete and utter rout. Their army, composed of over a hundred thousand monsters and the demon's finest elites, had been decimated. Barely ten percent of the demon army's original force had managed to return.

When Garland's citizens had seen the massive demon army arrayed on the plains outside their capital, they had been sure. Sure that the humans wouldn't stand a chance against such overwhelming might. But now they were forced to reconsider everything they'd been certain of.

Had the humans always been so strong? Were demons not actually the chosen race? Now that they'd been weakened, would they be the ones facing an invasion? And if so, did Garland have any hope of surviving? Garland's citizens discussed these questions at every opportunity they got, in a futile attempt to calm their unease. So far, neither the demon lord nor General Freid had made any public statements.

In truth, the atmosphere within the castle was even more despondent than out on the streets. Every soldier had lost someone they cared about, all in the blink of an eye. Had they lost in a proper battle, they could have at least blamed their general for not commanding well. Even if he wasn't at fault, they could have felt justified in pushing their anger and resentment onto him.

But not a single soldier could bring themselves to blame Freid. No one could have predicted that a giant pillar of light would rain down and annihilate their army in a few seconds. They could hardly denounce their general for not anticipating an attack like that. The

soldiers were too numb with despair to feel any anger, anyway. None of them had the willpower to search for someone to take responsibility.

Freid Bagwa sat in his office and buried his head in his hands.

"Ngh." It felt as though his heart had been ripped from his chest. He grit his teeth, and deep wrinkles formed on his forehead, which made his beautiful features scrunch up in worry and sorrow.

After all, he was the commander of the demon lord's forces, the general responsible for their defeat.

"I can't believe I'm so powerless!" He lamented his own incompetence. Having his old wounds reopened over and over again by that blonde girl hadn't been nearly enough punishment for his sins. Freid had already given his report to the demon lord. However, the demon lord he respected so much, God's very own chosen one, had deigned not to punish him.

Freid had been prepared to be executed on the spot. Of course, he knew that as Garland's only wielder of ancient magic, the demon lord wouldn't dispose of him so easily. But still, he felt responsible. He had wanted to be punished with death. Even now, the shame he felt at failing to fulfill his responsibilities to his sovereign, and to his god, was eating away at him.

Suddenly, he heard a knock at his door. The moment he gave his permission to enter, one of his men rushed into the room and yelled.

"U-Urgent report, sir! We have just learned the details of how the operations in the empire and the sea of trees concluded!"

"Davros and Divoff's units were in charge of those! Tell me how they fared!"

The Heiligh operation may have failed, but I pray those two at least succeeded. However, when he saw the expression on the messenger's face, Freid's heart sank.

"Yes, sir. Divoff succeeded in crippling the capital's defenses. However, his unit... failed to assassinate the emperor. He and his men died in the attempt."

"I see. So they gave their lives for His Majesty, and God."

Freid breathed a heavy sigh. He had ordered Divoff to retreat if he failed to assassinate the emperor. However, Divoff knew retreating from the capital would have been a difficult task, so he had probably decided to bet everything in an all-or-nothing duel. Freid couldn't decide whether he was proud of Divoff for fighting with honor, or angry at him for throwing away even a slim chance at survival.

In the end, he just shook his head and bade the messenger to continue.

"The conquest of the sea of trees... ended in complete failure. While Verbergen suffered numerous casualties, the city still stands.

Davros' unit was... completely wiped out."

"What!? Not a single person from Davros' unit survived? Shouldn't at least a few of them have been able to retreat!? No wait, Verbergen still stands? You mean to say that they weren't even able to reach the true labyrinth? Impossible..."

"According to the report, the scouts that went to investigate the situation were nearly wiped out as well. The few that survived... claimed that the beasts wearing the skins of rabbitmen haunted the woods."

Chills ran down Freid's spine. *Beasts wearing the skin of rabbitmen?* Freid thought back to the white-haired boy who was always giving him so much grief. One of his companions was definitely a rabbitman. And so, he was certain that boy had been behind Davros' defeat.

"That bastard!"

"F-Freid-sama?"

Freid was too incensed to take note of his subordinate's confusion. Even when he wasn't there himself, that boy was able to block Freid at every turn. Freid's blood was boiling.

Just then, he heard another knock at his door. It appeared he had another visitor. Freid squeezed his eyes shut and forced himself to calm down. Once he was in control of himself, he permitted the newcomer to enter.

"My apologies for the sudden visit, General. But His Majesty requests your presence."

"Ah. Understood, I'll head over at once." After a brief pause, Freid nodded. The messenger saluted and stepped down.

For the past ten days, Freid had been on standby. Both he and the people of Garland were nearing their limits. But now, the demon lord had finally summoned him. Freid hurried over to the throne room.

The guards saluted and pushed open the double doors when they saw Freid. As he stepped in the room, the first thing he saw was the demon lord. He had his back to Freid, and was gazing up at the portrait of God hanging behind the throne.

"Freid Bagwa at your service, Your Majesty."

Freid bent to one knee and bowed his head, but the demon lord continued staring at the portrait, and didn't reply.

Freid felt as though darkness was closing in all around him. Had he finally been abandoned by his lord? But then, without turning away from the portrait, the demon lord finally spoke.

"Did you hear what happened to the teams we sent to the empire and the sea of trees?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. I only just heard the report. This all happened because I misjudged our foe. I have no excuse for my failures."

The demon lord chuckled.

“No, there was no faults in your planning. This is all because that irregular showed up.”

“Yet—”

The demon lord continued, overriding Freid’s objection.

“More importantly, Freid. I would like to hear the report of your battle once more.”

“Y-Your Majesty? You want the details again?”

“Indeed. Specifically, I want to hear more about that blonde-haired, crimson-eyed girl that you fought. You claimed that she “restored” all of the injuries you’d suffered in the past?”

“Restored... yes, that is correct. As you say, Your Majesty. That magic felt more as if she were “restoring” something than some variant of healing magic.”

“And you said that she cast her spells without incantations or magic circles. Furthermore, she appeared to be little more than a child. Correct?”

“Yes, my lord. It is as you say.”

The demon lord chuckled again. However, this chuckle felt somehow different to Freid. It was as if there was a deeper meaning behind it.

“Your Majesty?”

Bewildered, Freid called out to him. The demon lord hurriedly coughed and switched back to his dignified tone.

“Freid. Most of our plans have ended in failure. Our invasion force has suffered a crippling blow. Though Garland is still safe so long as you and your monsters are here, the citizens grow uneasy.”

“My deepest apologies, Your Majesty. I take full responsibility for this failure.”

“I care nothing for assigning blame. The reason I called you here isn’t for that.”

Freid was practically prostrating himself before the demon lord at this point.

“I received an oracle.”

“You mean—”

Just once, Freid had heard their god Alv’s voice directly. Freid’s consciousness dimmed as he thought back to that meeting. However, he managed to keep himself from fainting in awe again.

Whatever the demon lord had to say, it was something he needed to hear. Freid braced himself. If the demon lord had been visited by Alv, then his next words would be the words of their exalted god.

The demon lord spoke in a slow yet majestic voice.

“I will grant you my apostles. Use them as you see fit. All I ask is that you bring the irregular and his comrades to me. Those were the words Lord Alv gifted to me.”

“Wha— H-He wants us to bring those monsters here!? But—”

Even if this was Alv’s will, Freid couldn’t do something like that. His anger toward Hajime and his companions was too great, so he refused to capture them alive. Freid opened his mouth to object, but fortunately trailed off before he could say something he would regret.

The reason he stopped was because a giant pillar of light suddenly appeared in front of him.

“I-Impossible!? Your Majesty, get back!” Worried that Hajime might be trying to assassinate them, Freid urged the demon lord to leave. However, the demon lord held out his hand to stop Freid.

The dazzling, mystical pillar of light pierced through the throne room’s ceiling, then expanded until it enveloped the room. Freid caught a glimpse of a kneeling figure at the center of the light before it grew so bright he had to cover his eyes.

As the light faded, Freid opened his eyes and saw a silver-haired beauty dressed in Valkyrie armor. Her figure was so perfect it left him captivated. However, her cold blue eyes were devoid of human warmth. The girl mechanically rose to her feet and spoke.

“I am Hearst, one of God’s Apostles. As my lord desires, I pledge my services to you, O demon lord. Allow me to sweep away all that stands in your path.”

“Well met. I look forward to seeing what you can do.”

Freid watched, dumbfounded, as the demon lord casually conversed with an Apostle of God. The demon lord took little note of Freid’s shock and continued speaking with the angel.

“Hearst. I was told that the irregular defeated your comrade, Noint... Are you sure you can handle this?”

“I am. Noint was but one of many.”

What’s that supposed to mean? Freid thought to himself. A second later, his unspoken question was answered.

Pillars of light sprouted up one after another within the massive throne room. There were easily over a hundred of them. And from each pillar of light, another Valkyrie emerged. That wasn’t all of them, either.

“Y-Your Majesty, General Freid! There’s hundreds of women with the exact same face standing outside the castle!”

As the messenger gave his report, Freid finally snapped back to his senses. He used spatial magic to open a gate and examined the situation outside. Apostles of God were lined up in orderly rows outside the castle’s front gates. At a glance, there appeared to be around 400 of them. And there were another 100 or so within the throne room as well.

Each and everyone of them had the exact same face and body type as Hearst. They all possessed the same mechanical, emotionless voice

as well.

“You have 500 Apostles to aid you. Defeat is unthinkable.”

Freid began to tremble. As did all the other soldiers, and even the citizens of Garland. Everyone’s gazes were glued to the divine host standing outside. They were all thinking the same thing.

Aaah. We really are the chosen race after all.

“Freid, I have new orders for you. Use these apostles to carry them out.”

“As you wish, my lord!” Freid was unbelievably moved by how composed his lord had remained throughout the arrival of the apostles. *I knew it, this is a man I can respect.* As he listened to his orders, a stray thought crossed his mind.

Come to think of it, His Majesty has blonde hair and crimson eyes too... just like that girl.

Extra Chapter: Lingering Feelings

An old carriage sped down a bumpy road, jostling its occupants uncomfortably. The old man sitting inside sighed wearily. The girl sitting next to him frowned.

“Simon-sama, will you please give it a rest?”

“Don’t be like that. Aaah, how depressing. I don’t want to go back to the capital.” He sighed again, in a more exaggerated manner this time. The girl, who’d repeated this exact same exchange dozens of times since they started on the road toward the capital, had long since run out of patience.

“Gah, stop being so annoying, grandfather! Just accept it already! You’ve been at it since we started, and we should reach the capital this afternoon, so stop whining! I can’t believe you have the gall to call yourself a bishop of the Holy Church!”

“But...”

“Don’t stick your thumb into your mouth. It doesn’t look cute when an old man does it, it just looks creepy!” The girl slapped the old man’s hand away from his mouth as she said that.

The old man, Simon Levellair, nursed his hand and pouted at the girl. Despite his immature attitude, he was 76 years old, and a bishop of the Holy Church. He had stark-white hair, jade-green eyes, and swarthy skin.

“Heeey. Assist me, stagecoach! My granddaughter’s bullying me!”

“Just ignore him, please! My grandfather’s old and senile!”

“I-If you say so,” the stagecoach replied hesitantly.

Simon frowned and started mumbling to himself about how youngsters these days had no respect for their elders.

Simon’s granddaughter, Sibyl Levellair, glared at him in irritation. She was eighteen years old, had blonde hair, her grandfather’s jade eyes, and the same dark skin. By all accounts, she was a stunning beauty. But when she got angry, she looked truly terrifying. That being said, Sibyl didn’t normally get angry. She was aiming to be a member of the clergy herself, and was usually as calm as a nun. Simon was about the only person in the world who could get her riled up.

“Surely you can forgive an old man for wanting to grumble. You saw what unbelievable things were written in Princess Liliana’s letter! And she wants me to, to... Ulp, I’m starting to feel sick.”

“Well, I suppose I can sympathize... Though I wonder why she

chose you, the bishop who was relegated to one of the most backwater regions of the kingdom...”

“When I was still at the head temple, the princess was but a child. I would often play with her before my banishment. I suppose that’s why she still remembers me. However...”

“Indeed... That doesn’t make reality any easier to face. In fact, I wish I could pretend none of this happened.”

It had been about two weeks ago that a royal messenger had come bearing urgent news. When Simon had asked what the matter was, the messenger had simply handed over a letter. The handwriting on the cover had most definitely been Princess Liliana’s. While it was true that Simon had once been a bishop at the head temple, and on good terms with Liliana, that had been almost ten years ago. He had been banished from the capital when he’d spoken out against the persecution of beastmen, and sent to a remote village in the northern reaches of the Grand Gruen Desert.

In fact, it was only because he’d recanted his statements that he hadn’t been executed as a heretic. Naturally, a clergyman with dangerous ideas like him had been barred from interacting with royalty, and he hadn’t spoken with Liliana since his banishment.

That was why his family had been shocked when they’d heard he’d received a letter from her. And if they’d been shocked before, they were stunned when they read the contents.

—The Holy Church’s head temple has been destroyed. The pope and all clergy serving within the capital have all perished.

What in Ehit’s name happened!? His family had all thought.

Had the messenger not shown them his royal emblem to prove that he was indeed bearing the princess’ words, Simon would have thought it was some kind of prank. Even now he wasn’t sure he fully believed the contents. However, the reason Simon was currently throwing a tantrum was because of the request that had come after that bombshell report.

—I would like Simon Levellair to succeed The position of Pope. Consequently, I humbly request that he head to the capital with all possible haste.

His family had been as surprised by the request as he was. Had the messenger not shown them his royal emblem to prove that he was indeed bearing the princess’ words, Simon would have thought it some kind of prank. Even now, he wasn’t sure this was real.

For her part, Liliana had considered her options carefully before choosing Simon. But to the man in question it seemed like a bolt out of the blue.

“But you know, I’m surprised. Her Highness did say in her letter that if you believed yourself too old to accept the post, you could

refuse. She's called in other potential candidates, so even if you're her first choice it's not like you had to accept. Seeing as you always talked about how much you hated the capital... I thought for sure you would refuse."

"Mmm... Truth be told, there's a mountain of reasons why I wanted to refuse."

Sibyl twitched. Something about her grandfather had just changed. It was like she was being sucked into his gaze. But then a second later, Simon returned to his usual grumbling self. Sibyl adjusted her posture and asked the obvious question.

"Then why didn't you?"

"I remembered an old legend, which made me feel like going to check it out for myself."

"What do you mean? Is it one passed down through the family?"

"Indeed. In fact, I've told it to you every day, Sibyl. Well, part of it, at least."

Sibyl tilted her head in confusion. She started racking her brain, trying to think of what legends her grandfather might have told her.

Simon smiled. *She really is a serious one*, he thought as he turned to the window beside him. Off in the distance, he could see the capital. It was a rather nostalgic sight.

Upon arriving in Heiligh's capital, the first thing Simon did was ditch his nagging granddaughter. He tricked her by using one of his practiced illusion spells and slipped into the crowd entering the city. He also made sure to wear a simple traveler's cloak over his bishop's vestments, making him stand out less.

Thank the heavens I brought my bag of holding with me. Simon's bag of holding was a family heirloom, and an artifact. He mostly used this legendary artifact that could hold far more than its size suggested to store all of his escape artist goods.

"Oh my, the capital is in far worse shape than I expected. Those demons sure are cruel."

It was only natural for the city to have changed over the past ten years, but it hurt Simon's heart to see it so ravaged by war. He deftly picked his way across the rubble in the streets, walking at a swift pace that belied his age.

"It seems the princess really was telling the truth when she said the temple had been destroyed. But, hmm. Despite that..."

The citizens were surprisingly lively. *Was the Holy Church's influence simply that weak?* Simon thought quizzically to himself.

Liliana's letter hadn't explained the details of the temple's destruction. Simon guessed that the particulars were confidential, and that only the bishop chosen to succeed the position of pope would be

told the full story. It was actually for that reason that Simon had wanted to see how the capital's people were faring with his own eyes first. And frankly, he was surprised.

Figuring that the fastest way to get answers was to ask someone, he walked up to a carpenter on break and asked him about recent events in the capital. The responses he received left him dumbstruck.

Supposedly, an evil god had been using Ehit's name to spread malice, and then a pillar of light from the real Ehit had come down and destroyed an army.

"Whoever came up with this story sure has a wicked sense of humor. And a grudge against Lord Ehit, I wager."

Simon could tell what the carpenter had told him was a story fabricated to placate the masses. His mind was whirling with more questions than before. But before he could start sorting out his thoughts, he heard a commotion in the distance. Simon looked over and spotted a group of men quarreling with each other.

"Not again. What are they fighting about this time?" The carpenter Simon had been talking to frowned.

"Is this a common occurrence?"

"Lately, yeah. Everyone's been on edge since the Holy Church was destroyed."

As I thought, the Holy Church's destruction did have some effect on the people. As he watched, the men's argument grew even more vehement. Finally, one of the men shoved the other into a wooden beam that was being repaired. The pillar swayed slightly, and the tools resting on top of it came tumbling to the ground.

"Watch out," the carpenter yelled. At the same time, Simon took action.

"Sacred Shields."

He muttered that under his breath, and a second later, numerous glowing circles appeared above the man, catching the tools that were about to fall on him. Simon made sure to soften his shields so that the tools didn't break upon impact.

"D-Did you do that, old man?"

Simon had cast with almost no incantation. No average mage could pull that off. The workers all turned to Simon. It was then that he noticed that the earlier commotion had blown his traveler's robe off, and his white bishop's vestments were visible for all to see.

"Y-You're a bishop?"

"N-No, I'm just..."

A bishop had appeared in the capital that had lost all its clergy. It wasn't surprising that the construction workers' eyes all started shining with hope. He knew that before long, word of his existence would spread. Simon hurriedly wrapped his cloak around him once

more, but it was too little too late.

He'd snuck into the capital to see how the people were faring, but now it was just a matter of time before his granddaughter found him and dragged him to the castle. Worse, the citizens were pressing close, begging for guidance.

"Mrrr, I suppose this is as far as I go." Just as Simon was about to give up, he heard a young, sharp voice call out from behind him.

"Hey! What's all the ruckus!? Are you guys fighting again!?"

A girl with chestnut-colored hair jogged over to the group. When the workers spotted her they reverently called out, "Miss Apostle!" The girl grimaced at the word "apostle," but then spotted Simon and looked questioningly at him. Simon was surprised to see one of the famed Apostles of God here, but right now, escaping this predicament took priority.

Young lady, please save me! I need to get out of here, he implored with his gaze.

I'm not sure what's going on, but I think that old man wants me to get him out of here. This Apostle of God was rather quick on the uptake.

"Everyone, I know these are trying times, but please don't fight with each other. We'll be getting a new pope soon, so just hold on until then!"

The citizens bowed their heads while sneaking hopeful glances toward Simon. Cold sweat poured down his back, but at the girl's urging, he followed her through the throng of people. The girl led him briskly through the streets, until they finally stopped in an empty alley.

"My, thank you for your help, young lady. You saved my hide. Would you be so kind as to tell me your name?"

"Oh, uhh, I didn't do much, really." The girl scratched her cheek awkwardly and averted her gaze.

"My name's Yuka. Yuka Sonobe."

"I see. Well then, Miss Yuka, let me once again extend my thanks. By the way, those men back there called you an apostle. Would you happen to be..."

"Yeah, I guess. Though I'm not really anyone special. Just another student, really." Yuka smiled self-deprecatingly, and Simon narrowed his eyes.

"Well, it is an honor to make your acquaintance. But should someone as important as you really be out patrolling the city? Or is the capital truly that short on hands?"

"It's true that we need all the help we can get, but, really I just want to stop the fights from getting worse. Everyone's worried now that they lost their pope. Plus, plenty of people lost their loved ones too, so... I feel like the people who are still able should do everything

they can to restore the capital.” As she said that, Yuka looked eastward, off into the distance. In a tiny voice, she whispered “If I don’t, then there would be no point to staying behind...”

Simon, who had rather good hearing, caught every word. He examined this girl the citizens venerated as their apostle. After analyzing her expression, he nodded to himself.

“I see now. Miss Yuka, that’s a rather lovely face you’re making. Did the man you fell for leave for the empire?”

“I-I haven’t fallen for him or anything! Actually, wait, where’d that even come from!?” Yuka blushed to the tips of her ears as she vehemently denied Simon’s words.

And then, Simon gave a simple, yet shockingly accurate response.

“I only said what was written on your face. It seems clear to me that you wished to travel together with this boy who departed, but were unable to due to various circumstances. At the very least, that’s what your expression is saying.”

“How’d you come up with something so specific!? Anyway, you’re wrong. Really. I-I just...” Yuka looked ready to say something, but then shook her head and trailed off. This wasn’t something she should be discussing with strangers. Attempting to hide her sorrowful expression, Yuka turned to go.

“I need to get going. I don’t know exactly what was going on back there, but be careful out—”

“Why not talk about it?” Simon interrupted her. Yuka turned to him with a confused look. A second later she realized what he was referring to and looked into his eyes. It was the bottomless kindness she saw in them that kept her from saying “No thanks, I’d rather not,” and leaving.

“Despite how I look, I’m a very good listener. Besides, when I see youngsters suffering, I just can’t leave them alone. What’s tormenting you so? Trust me, you’ll feel better once you’ve let it all out.”

Still, Yuka hesitated. After all, this really wasn’t the kind of thing you could tell to strangers.

Seeing her uncertainty, Simon continued, but there wasn’t the slightest bit of coercion in his voice. Just a warm, gentle, acceptance.

“Perhaps our meeting was fated. Fear not, this old man won’t find your worries embarrassing, no matter what they might be. I’ve spent my long life being an embarrassment to others, so I’d know best!”

Simon grinned playfully, and Yuka chuckled in response. She couldn’t help but trust this kind old man. Perhaps it was because of the gentle aura that surrounded him. Normally, she wouldn’t have told this to anyone, but she instinctively felt as though it would be alright to open up to Simon.

“Ahaha, I guess I can tell you. Though to be honest, I’m not even

sure this can even be called a real worry.” Yuka sat down on a nearby bench and sighed. Then, she turned to this old man she barely knew, and bared her heart.

“There’s someone who saved me. Twice. The first time, he saved my life.” Yuka thought back to that moment. The moment she thought she was about to die. She still vividly remembered the ghastly skeleton that had swung its sword down at her head, but that blade had never connected.

“Don’t worry, as long as we stay calm these pile of bones are nothing.”

Even though he’d been the weakest of them, the one everyone had ridiculed for being useless, he’d saved her.

“The second time, he saved my soul.” Yuka thought back to the time she’d been drowning in despair after having her spirit crushed. She had known she needed to get back up and fight, but the fear of death had traumatized her.

“A girl like you won’t die so easily.” After crawling out of the abyss, those were the words that boy had said to her. Though there was no basis to what he’d said, she still believed in them even now. As long as she kept trying, she wouldn’t die. There was no foundation for that assumption, but she trusted it anyway.

Thanks to his words, she’d overcome her trauma and found the courage to move forward. It was because of him that she’d been able to react instantly when the capital was invaded.

“I want to pay him back somehow. I want to show him that I made good use of the life he saved. I know he probably doesn’t even remember, but I want to do something for him anyway.” Yuka once again looked off to the east, and sighed.

“But, pathetic as it is, there’s nothing I have that he would want. There’s nothing I can do that would matter. He’s just so far above me, and he keeps on getting further.”

“You didn’t tell him to wait for you?”

Yuka smiled wanly.

“I couldn’t. I mean, we don’t even have that kind of relationship.”

I wonder if that’s truly the case, Simon thought as he observed Yuka’s profile.

Yuka fell silent for a moment, then told Simon about what was really eating at her.

“I just hate how pathetic I am. I can’t even do anything to repay him...” She looked at Simon as if to say “See, I told you it wasn’t even worth calling a worry.”

Simon stroked his chin as he gazed at Yuka’s bitter smile.

“So after seeing that person off, you’ve been helping rebuild the capital because you think it’s the least you can do?”

“Yeah, basically. A lot of my comrades still can’t fight... and since I’m one of the few who can, I thought it’d be best to stay behind just in case... And like, there’s a lot of fights breaking out in the streets, so I can at least help break those up... even if that’s got nothing to do with repaying him.”

Simon nodded in understanding, then smiled broadly at Yuka.

“You’re one impressive girl, you know that? It may seem mundane, but pushing forward and always striving to do what you can isn’t something just anyone can do.”

“I-I’m really not that special...” It felt weird to be praised in such a straightforward manner. Honestly, Yuka kind of felt like she was talking to her real grandfather. She blushed in embarrassment and awkwardly looked away.

Simon smiled warmly at her and continued.

“Everyone comes to a point in their life where they hit a roadblock. Everyone. To keep doing what you can and still push forward despite that... is far more difficult than it sounds, which is why I really do think it’s impressive that you can keep going, Miss Yuka. At the very least, this old man thinks that as long as you keep going as you are, that’s enough.”

“It is?”

“Indeed. One day, there will come a time when that boy you owe your life to reaches a roadblock of his own. Whether it’s because he’s too tired to keep going, or because his journey has come to an end, I don’t know. But eventually, he too will come to a stop. When that time comes, just keep going as you have been. Do what you can, and you’ll be able to finally repay him.”

Yuka’s eyes widened in surprise. It felt as if a ray of light had cleared away the darkness gathering at the corners of her heart. Slowly but surely, her feelings started slotting into place.

“Do what I can, huh...?”

Simon watched silently, waiting for Yuka to find her own answer. And, after a few minutes of companionable silence, Yuka quietly muttered something.

“My family runs a western gastropub... Uhh, basically, it’s like a restaurant.”

“Oh?”

“It’s pretty famous back in my hometown, and we’ve got a lot of regulars... I liked working there, so I always thought I’d take over it one day.”

Simon’s expression clouded over when he heard her talk about her dreams in the past tense, but he continued listening quietly.

“I know it’s kind of arrogant to say, but... I think my cooking’s pretty good, personally. I’m good at brewing tea and coffee, too. So I

was thinking... maybe after his journey's over and we all go home together..."

The dark shadows that had hung over Yuka's face vanished. Or at least, that's what it looked like to Simon. Charmed by her smile, Simon smiled back.

"Yeah. Once everything's over, I'll invite him to my restaurant and treat him to the best meal he's ever had!"

"That's the spirit. Mmm, I'm glad you're finally feeling better. A smile suits that lovely face of yours best."

Yuka joyfully swung her feet back and forth. She was blushing again, but this time because she was happy. After watching her for a few moments, Simon asked her something that had been nagging at him for quite some time.

"By the way, young lady. You called your restaurant a 'western gastropub,' did you not? What kind of food—" Simon was interrupted by an angry yell.

"Graaaaaandfaaaaaaaaaaaaatheeeeeeeeeeeeer! I finally found youuuuuuuuuu!"

"Wha—!? My granddaughter looks like a demon!" Upon seeing his granddaughter charging toward him, Simon stood up faster than one would think possible for his age. Then, he turned to Yuka, who was looking back and forth between the two of them and spoke hastily.

"I'm afraid that's my cue, Miss Yuka. I pray your future is one where you can live freely!"

"Huh? Uh, okay? Th-Thank you?"

"Farewell!" Simon crouched low, and dashed off at unbelievable speed. "Run like the wind," he shouted, his voice trailing off into the distance. Sibyl chased after him, running nearly as fast. A gust of wind blew past in her wake.

"Wh-What just happened?"

The only person left in the street was a confused Yuka.

"What kind of granddaughter strikes her own grandfather? How could Sibyl be so cruel!" Simon rubbed the back of his head as he strolled through the palace courtyard. After a long game of cat and mouse, Sibyl had finally caught her grandfather. Then, she gave him a good smack to the head and dragged him off to the royal palace.

"Still... that's quite the tale we just heard."

Upon arriving at the palace, Simon and Sibyl had been ushered into the throne room to have an audience with Queen Luluaria, Prince Lundel, and the prime minister. Once they'd cleared the room, they'd begged Simon to take the position of pope, even if only temporarily. The people were growing restless, and they needed religious guidance. However, Simon had asked to hear the truth about what had

happened to the head temple before agreeing to anything.

Luluaria and the others had decided that if Liliana had recommended him he must be trustworthy. After warning him that leaking this information to anyone would mean his death, they explained everything. Sibyl had been so shocked upon hearing the truth that she'd needed to go to her rooms and rest after. Thanks to his age, Simon had been able to accept the story a little more calmly. That being said, he still needed time to sort out his feelings, which was why he'd gone to take a walk alone.

As he gazed upon the courtyard's vibrant array of flowers, he noticed there was someone else standing behind one of the hedges.

"Oh my, it appears I have company."

"Hwuh? Oh, good afternoon."

A short woman poked her head out from behind the hedges.

"Good afternoon, young lady. Did I disturb you?"

"Oh no, not at all! I was just spacing out anyway." The woman smiled wryly at Simon.

I see I'm not the only one who wanted a quiet place to sort out my thoughts.

"Mmm, I see. To tell you the truth, I was rather lost in my own thoughts myself. I was hoping to find a quiet place to think things through. Would it be alright if I joined you, young lady?"

"Oh yes, go ahead."

Simon rounded the hedge and realized that the woman must have been sitting on the bench beside her before he'd arrived. He bowed his thanks and took a seat. Seeing no reason to leave, the woman sat down next to him.

"Umm, who..."

"Oh yes, where are my manners. My name is Simon. I'm just a doddering old man."

"I-I see. My name is Aiko Hatayama. Also, I'm 26 years old, so I'm not exactly a 'young lady.'"

"Truly!?"

That was almost as shocking a revelation as the truth about Ehit had been. Simon's eyes looked like they were about to pop out of his skull.

Aiko smiled sadly to herself. *I guess I really do look that young to other people.* She hated that she'd gotten used to being treated like a child.

Simon coughed loudly to disperse the awkward atmosphere, then sighed. He closed his eyes and lost himself in his thoughts. The only sound in the courtyard was that of the wind rustling through the leaves. The palace's courtyard was a rather calming place. After quite some time, Simon spoke, his eyes still closed.

“Is there something you would like to say, Aiko-dono?”

“Hweh!?”

“You’ve been sighing and glancing my way for some time now. If I’m being a bother, I don’t mind going somewhere else...”

“S-Sorry. You’re not a bother at all... It’s just, you looked like you were worried about something, so I thought...”

“Ah, this person is just like me?”

“No, well... yes,ahaha.”

Simon slowly opened his eyes and smiled kindly at Aiko.

“I wouldn’t say I’m worried. Rather, I’m simply sorting out my feelings.”

“Sorting out your feelings?”

“Indeed. Aiko-dono, would you like me to help you sort out your own feelings?”

“Uhhh...”

Simon’s gentle gaze reminded Aiko of one of her teachers from long ago, and she accidentally whispered, “Sensei...” The moment she let that slip she blushed and looked away.

“I don’t mind. Why not tell this Sensei your troubles, Aiko-dono?”

“Ugh...” *God, this is so embarrassing. What am I, a five-year-old who accidentally thought someone else was my mom?* Despite her shame, Simon didn’t laugh, or ridicule her. It was because he kept looking gently at her that Aiko felt comfortable opening up to him.

“Anyway... there’s this person I’m interested in.”

“I see. I must say, I’m rather fond of this variety of gossip... However that’s a rather glum expression for someone who’s talking about her crush.”

“Well, there’s a lot of problems with...” Aiko trailed off, but then she steeled herself and plowed forward.

“R-Relationships between teacher and student are forbidden! Besides, he already has someone he’s set his heart on!”

“I see. So the man you love is your teacher, and he’s already married...”

“I’m the teacher!”

“Oh yes, you’re 26 years old. I almost forgot. Truly, it never ceases to amaze me...” Simon stroked his chin and muttered to himself.

“Is it truly such an insurmountable obstacle? Surely there are paths open to you still. For example, you could wait for him to graduate from being your student.”

“A former student is still a student!”

“I see. Then perhaps you could quit being a teacher, Aiko-dono.”

“That’s the one thing I will never do.” Aiko’s expression turned serious. Simon was momentarily taken aback by the vehemence in her voice.

“I see you take your position as an educator quite seriously. I think I understand now why this is such a grave matter for you... Aiko-dono, what exactly does being a teacher mean to you?” Simon responded with a gaze every bit as serious as Aiko’s. She could tell that it was more than mere curiosity that was driving him.

After a moment’s hesitation, Aiko straightened her back and answered carefully, making sure to choose the right words.

“Back when I was a student, there was a teacher who taught me something really important. He was a strict, old-fashioned kind of teacher who almost never smiled.”

Most of Aiko’s classmates had hated him. He was getting on in years, and a lot of them said to his face that they wished he’d just retire already. Truth be told, Aiko wasn’t very fond of him at first, either.

“I grew up in a really rural town, where the established families were like celebrities and held a lot of power in town politics. And one time, one of the bigger family’s child broke the law.”

He’d been a famous problem child within their small community. The kind of kid who used his status to bully others. One day, he’d stolen from a nearby shop. He’d probably just done it on a whim. But the thing he’d stolen was a high-end mountain bike. As he’d been riding it around he’d spotted Aiko and an idea had sprouted in his mind.

“He hid the bike inside my family’s shed. He probably thought he was just playing a prank.”

“Why did he pick your house specifically, Aiko-dono?”

Aiko smiled bitterly and responded.

“Well, I was one of those goody two shoes kids. The kind that always played by the rules and told people off when they were doing something wrong.”

She had been stereotypical class president. She’d always lectured the boys about playing around too much, and when they argued back she said “I’m not the one in the wrong here.” Little wonder that all the teenage boys had found her a stuck-up prude.

“But regardless of that boy’s intentions, theft was theft. When the store clerk discovered his bike was missing, he filed a police report.”

“And when they police found the bike in your shed, they suspected you of being the thief?”

“Yes. Of course, I had no plausible motive for stealing the bike. I was too short to even ride it. Still, the police claimed I had to be the culprit.”

“I can see where this is going. That boy’s parents must have bribed the police, right?”

Aiko smiled wanly and nodded.

“No matter how many times I told them I was innocent, people didn’t believe me. Of course, my family and friends did, but... well, rumors spread quickly in a small town. The day after I’d been arrested, the townspeople were all treating me like I was a criminal.”

It was possible they might not really have believed she was guilty. Especially Aiko’s teachers, who knew her well. However, they all caved to peer pressure and scorned her along with the rest. They knew that if they spoke out, they would be the next ones shunned. And because they were scared of that idea, they pretended not to notice anything. The teachers who’d always treated Aiko with kindness now acted as if she really were a criminal.

“It was only that old teacher who listened to me. When he heard my side of the story, he got angrier than I’d ever seen him. Not at me, but at the police.”

Aiko’s classmates, her teachers, and even her neighbors hadn’t believed her, but the teacher everyone else hated had.

“It was thanks to all of his hard work... that my name was finally cleared, but in return...” Aiko’s teacher earned the wrath of the town’s most influential family, and was forced to leave.

“So he put his livelihood on the line to protect one of his students. Sounds like a truly honorable man.”

“Yes. He’s someone I respect from the bottom of my heart.” Aiko gave Simon a proud smile. It was because of that teacher that she had decided to become a teacher who would always be there for her students. A teacher who would never abandon them, no matter what they did.

“That’s why I will never quit being a teacher.”

“I see...” Simon muttered, and nodded in understanding. Her devotion to her cause was absolute. However, life never made chasing one’s dreams easy. Ever since arriving in this world, Aiko’s resolve had constantly been tested. She’d started harboring feelings that she knew were forbidden, and had had the foundations of her beliefs shattered over and over.

After numerous failures, Aiko had been forced to accept that sticking to her ideals wasn’t always possible. Anyone else would have compromised, or given up on their goals. However, Aiko couldn’t do that. Her pride as a teacher wouldn’t allow her to. She would continue being a role model for her students, or die trying.

At the same time, though, she couldn’t just give up on her taboo feelings for Hajime. It was a contradiction that tore at her identity.

“That was quite an interesting tale. However, I must say Aiko-dono, you have quite the bothersome personality.”

“E-Excuse me!? I mean, I know I can be kind of annoying at times, but...”

Despite his harsh words, Simon's expression was still soft. Hearing her story had helped clear up his own feelings. He inwardly thanked her as he watched her flustered reaction.

"If you absolutely cannot give up on being a teacher, then I suppose the only solution would be to give up on your feelings... But if that was something you could easily do, you wouldn't be worrying like this."

"That's exactly the problem..." *I'm supposed to be a teacher, so I can't be thinking things like this*, Aiko silently berated herself.

Simon laid a hand on her shoulder and spoke up.

"No matter the situation, everyone has only two options. To turn back, or push forward." Both his demeanor and his tone of voice had changed. Aiko returned to her senses and turned to him. Simon's jade-green eyes looked deeply into her own. Until now, he had appeared to be just a senile old man, but now he looked like a wise sage.

"If you turn back, you will likely have many regrets, but you will also be able to preserve the identity you've built up. If you push forward, your desires may be granted, but the image of the ideal teacher you've been striving so long to become may forever be sullied, and by your own hands no less. Moreover, it's possible the boy you love won't even return your feelings and simply find you a bother." Simon smiled a little to take the sting out of his words. Aiko sat there quietly, waiting for him to finish.

"Choosing between your pride and your desires is no easy thing. It's difficult to even compare them. I wouldn't be able to tell you which choice is right, but... you've finally found something you truly desire. I think it would be far too cruel to abandon that newly born wish before it's even had time to grow, Aiko-dono. Why not see where embracing it takes you?"

"Embrace it?" Aiko looked down and considered Simon's words. The silence stretched on as Aiko debated with herself. And, after what seemed like hours, she turned to Simon again, a refreshed smile on her face.

"Well, that was a wonderful way to put it. Though I think the path you've advised me to take will be a thorny one..."

"Is there any path truly devoid of thorns? And even if there were, is there any value in treading down such a path?"

"I guess that's true. At the very least, I agree that it wouldn't feel right to cut off these feelings. I suppose I'll try to look at things in a more positive light."

"Good, good. Feelings by themselves are neither good nor evil. I pray that you grasp a future chosen of your own free will."

"Thank you very much!"

Simon then returned to his usual good-natured old man persona

and spent some more time chatting with Aiko. Once their conversation came to an end, he returned to the throne room to tell the queen his decision. The queen thanked him for making such a difficult choice, and the two privately discussed what direction to take the Holy Church in moving forward. As he left the queen's private chambers, Simon heard his granddaughter call out to him.

"Grandfather... judging from your expression, I gather you took the post? Why?"

It seemed she'd been waiting for him to finish. From the looks of it, she'd gotten over the initial shock of hearing about the gods' betrayal. Her gaze didn't waver as she looked up at her grandfather.

"Regardless of what Ehit may or may not be, this is something the people need. Besides, I want to help this kingdom's apostles... No, the children who were summoned into this world." Simon may have run off the moment he'd reached the capital, but it wasn't because he'd wanted to play around.

Instead, he'd needed to gather unbiased information before he made such an important decision. Sibyl realized that now too, which was why she furrowed her brows in worry. Seeing how conflicted she was, Simon decided to tell her the legend that had been passed down through the Levellair family.

"Sibyl. Remember back in the carriage when I told you I came here because of an old legend?"

"Yes, of course. You said that part of the legend is something you've told me every day."

"Indeed. It is something that is told only to the current head of the Levellair family. It's a little early, but I think it's time I told you."

Why now? Sibyl thought to herself. Simon cast a soundproofing spell and sang.

"Children of those who rebelled, live strong while gazing up at the heavens. The will of god descends upon silver wings, and envelops all with its absolute authority. But cling not to this false freedom. Keep your silence, hide your desires, and have hope. For one day, there will appear a hero who once more raises the flag of rebellion. Watch, listen, and decide for yourselves, children of those who rebelled. I pray the time comes that you may live freely."

Those words reverberated inside Sibyl's heart, and she fell silent.

"That was a legend one of our ancestors from centuries ago left for us. No, perhaps it would be better to call it a prophecy. Oddly enough, if any member of the Levellair family hears it even once, they will never forget it."

"It certainly does feel like it's been engraved into my mind. What... What exactly does it mean?" Though Sibyl didn't fully understand it, she could feel a sincere desire to convey something in

that verse.

“For the longest time, I had no idea. Until the queen told us the truth about Ehit, anyway.”

Sibyl gasped. Shivers ran down her spine.

I see now, so that's what grandfather meant by prophecy. To think one of our ancestors from centuries ago had predicted such a thing...

“For generations, the heads of the Levellair family have puzzled over the meaning of this prophecy. In fact, the only reason I answered Princess Liliana's summons was because I hoped it might shed light on the meaning of those words. And so I watched, listened, and decided for myself.”

“Grandfather... you...” Sibyl trembled in awe as the weight of centuries of unbroken history washed over her.

“I will become the pope... so that I can help the people of this world be free.”

Simon's voice was backed by such a firm will that for a moment Sibyl wondered if this was really her grandfather she was talking to. But then in the next second, he bowed his head to her, as if beseeching her for help. Then, without waiting for a reply, he walked off. Sibyl silently gathered her resolve and followed after him. Seeing that she'd chosen to come, Simon spoke calmly.

“Oh yes, there's one more thing. It's something that accompanies the legend.”

“I'm not sure I can take any more revelations today...”

“Oh, it's nothing important. Just that the Levellair family has a second family name.”

“It does? You mean we're not just the Levellairs?”

“Indeed. Formally, my full name would be Simon L. G. Levellair.”

“L... G... What do those letters stand for?” *I guess that would make me Sibyl L. G. Levellair.*

“The L stands for Liv, while the G... stands for Gruen.”

“Hohoho. I couldn't tell you why those are part of our family name, but I suppose far in the past a place called Liv might have existed.”

Sibyl considered that for a few seconds.

How come our family name was taken from the desert of all places!?



Afterword

Hello everyone, resident chuuni lover Ryo Shirakome here. Thank you all so much for buying Arifureta volume 7.

How'd you like it? For once, it wasn't a volume about Hajime beating up everyone or clearing a labyrinth. In fact, the cute, fluffy rabbitmen assassins of Haltina were the stars of this volume.

Though I gotta wonder, how did this arc somehow end up 1.5 times longer than the web version of it?

I guess it's because the Haulia are just so much fun to write about. Once I picked up the pen, I just couldn't stop writing. To be honest, putting in too much stuff is a bad habit of mine. But this time, I'd like to think I put that bad habit to good use.

Though in the end, my editor was all like, "Don't you think you made the Haulia arc a little too long?" And that was after I'd already cut a bunch of stuff!

So to those of you who were like my editor and thought this arc was too long, I humbly apologize. Please forgive this bad habit of mine.

Anyway, I'm sure you all noticed but I introduced a new character in this volume's extra chapter. Heiligh's new pope. Even if the temple was destroyed, the people's faith hasn't vanished, so I figured the world of Arifureta would need someone to rebuild the Holy Church. That's where Simon came in, but that wasn't the only reason I wanted to introduce him.

I also wanted to link the current world of Arifureta a little more to the world of Arifureta Zero. I wanted to show it wasn't just Hajime and the others who'd inherited Miledi and Oscar's will, but the people of Tortus as well. I hope it turned out alright. I guess you could also just say I really wanted to advertise my spin-off series, though. Sorry for being such a crafty capitalist.

Oh yeah, apparently Arifureta's anime'll be coming out soon. To think it's really happening... I still can't wrap my head around it. It's all thanks to you guys who supported my work. So really, thank you! No words can express just how grateful I am to all of you! Last, but most definitely not least, it's time for the acknowledgments.

As always, I'd like to thank my wonderful illustrator Takayaki-sensei, my hardworking editor, my proofreader, and RoGa-sensei who does such cool illustrations for Arifureta's manga. I'd also like to thank

Mori Misaki-sensei, the artist for Arifureta's spin-off, Arifureta Nichijou de Sekai Saikyou, and everyone else who's helped make publishing all of these books possible.

And, of course, I'd like to thank my readers, both my fans on Narou and the ones who read the light novel! Thank you so much for your continued support! I hope to see you again in another Arifureta volume!

Ryo Shirakome

Bonus Short Stories

Arifureta Fairy Tales ~Cinderella~

Once upon a time, there was a girl named Cinderella. Her mother had died some years past, and she spent her days being tormented by her two older stepsisters. Originally her hair had been a glossy black, but over time it had gotten dirty as poor Cinderella had been forced to do all the housework. Today, too, she toiled under the harsh insults of her sisters.

“Oi, Cinderella! Quit bawling and get to work! Breakfast isn’t anywhere near ready, you slacker!” The younger of the two stepsisters, a girl with bunny ears, stalked up to Cinderella and started yelling at her, her bunny ears standing on end.

“Eeek, I’m sorry. I’ll get started right away, so please don’t yell at me...” Cinderella scurried over to the kitchen. Cooking, fetching water, washing dishes, and getting yelled at for not making the food tasty enough were all part of her duties. Poor Cinderella really had it tough.

Still in tears, Cinderella started preparing breakfast. Just then, her rabbit-eared older sister poked her head in to see how she was doing. She gave Cinderella the kind of glare only a stepsister could and kicked up a fuss.

“Sheesh, you’re hopeless, Cinderella! How many times do I have to explain it before you understand!? You have to curl your fingers when you hold the knife or you’ll cut yourself!”

“S-Sorry!” Cinderella shrunk back. However, her sister wasn’t done yet. She stood behind Cinderella and took hold of her hands.

“How dumb can you get!? Look, I’ll do it with you, so pay attention!”

“Eeek, stop! I can do it, so stop grabbing me so hard!” Cinderella’s screams mingled with the rhythmical chopping of vegetables. The knife cut down with extreme precision, millimeters from Cinderella’s poor fingers. In seconds, the vegetables had been cut into symmetrical pieces, a dark omen of what Cinderella’s fingers would likely become if she didn’t start getting it together.

Satisfied, the rabbit-eared stepsister went off to handle other tasks, leaving a terrified Cinderella to finish preparing breakfast. She sighed despondently and got back to work, only to be interrupted by a different voice.

“How long do you plan on making your elder sister wait, you doddering dolt!?”

“My apologies, perv—ahem, elder sister. I’ll be done soon.”

“Be quick about it! Unlike you, I have business that needs attending to!” The elder stepsister started rushing Cinderella, as she was wont to do. Exhausted from the constant labor, Cinderella grew sloppy in her work. The eldest stepsister grinned expectantly. Though it seemed her enjoyment wasn’t coming from bullying Cinderella, but rather something else entirely. Indeed, as she hoped, Cinderella was so rushed that as she passed her stepsister by, she tripped.

“Oh no!” The pot she was holding slipped out of her hands, and spilled its scalding hot contents all over her stepsister.

“Aaaaaah!? Oh Cinderella you klutz! You got boiling water all over my face! Could you be any clumsier!? At any rate, well done! Haaah... Haaah...” Cinderella’s stepsister covered her face, fell to the ground, and writhed in “agony.” She didn’t stop insulting Cinderella even as the water burned her skin though. Her anger—and pleasure—were clearly noticeable in her tone.

“I-I’m so sorry, elder sister!” Cinderella trembled in fear.

After that incident, her bunny-ear stepsister came back and ordered her to clean the house. Upon seeing how poor a job Cinderella was doing, she clicked her tongue and started teaching her how to do it better. The same thing happened when Cinderella started sewing, as well.

“You’ll hurt yourself if you work like that,” her stepsister exclaimed and once again taught her a more efficient method.

The entire time, her other stepsister was hovering close by, rushing Cinderella so that she would screw up in a way that would cause the instigator pain. And every time Cinderella ended up accidentally hurting her stepsister, she would writhe on the ground panting excitedly.

At any rate, Cinderella had a hard life. But then one day, the family received an invitation to a royal ball. It appeared the ball was being held so that the prince could pick out a fiancée. Both of Cinderella’s stepsisters were completely smitten with the prince. Every time they saw him out on the streets, their hearts started pounding. And this ball was the perfect opportunity to make the prince of their dreams theirs. Naturally, Cinderella was just as enamored with the prince as the others.

“Stepsisters! Please let me go to the party too!”

Cinderella’s two stepsisters exchanged glances, nodded to each other, and turned her down flat.

“Absolutely not!” “No way!” They cruelly denied Cinderella her wish.

“Why must you be so mean!? What’s so wrong with me going?” Cinderella was being unusually assertive. It appeared she was truly angry. Seeing her desperation, her two stepsisters sighed.

“Is it not obvious? We are worried for the prince.”

“Did you already forget how you stalked him before and had to be dragged away by the royal guards?”

I never did anything like that! Cinderella harrumphed and looked away defiantly.

The bunny-eared stepsister bristled. *Who do you think had to pay the bail to get you out!?*

“Besides, you own no dresses.”

“Ugh, you’re right...” Cinderella lamented. She owned no pretty dresses like her stepsisters.

“That’s your own fault. You’re the one who sold them all off to ‘pay for the prince’s living expenses.’ We even told you over and over to save at least one of them for occasions like this!”

I never did anything like that! Cinderella harrumphed and looked away defiantly. In the end, Cinderella went to her mother’s grave and wept in despair. As she was crying, she realized she wasn’t alone.

“Young lady, why are you so sad?”

Looking up, Cinderella saw a beautiful, crimson-eyed witch standing in front of her mother’s grave. She was bedecked in a billowing black robe, and a pointed hat. After a moment of brief consideration, Cinderella decided to tell this strange witch all about her troubles. She poured her heart out about her overbearing stepsisters, her terrible life at home, her secret love for the prince, and her dismay at learning she wouldn’t be able to go to the ball. When she finished, the witch sniffled a little.

“There is no fate so powerful it cannot be overturned. A path to salvation must still exist somewhere.”

Cinderella stared at the witch blankly, not comprehending.

“Fear not. I will find you a path that lets you attend the ball.”

“Miss Witch...” Moved, Cinderella embraced her savior. Curious about why a stranger would lend her a helping hand, Cinderella asked the witch why she was being so kind. In response, the witch lowered the brim of her hat, hiding her expression. Quietly, she spoke of her past. Of how she’d been betrayed by her family and imprisoned for centuries. When she’d finally escaped, everyone she knew was dead. And so, she’d wandered the world alone, a witch without a home. That was why she felt compelled to help others in trouble.

How tragic! I’m so sorry I ever thought I had it bad! I’ve truly been blessed! Cinderella burst into sobs as she thought that, and the confused witch awkwardly tried to console her. Once Cinderella had calmed down, the witch left, saying that she needed to prepare some

things and would return on the day of the ball.

The evening of the ball, some time after Cinderella's stepsisters had left, the witch came to see Cinderella again.

"I got everything." The witch held out a stunning dress and an exquisite pair of glass slippers.

"You're so skilled, Miss Witch! I can't believe you were able to make such beautiful things with magic."

"Hm? I sewed the dress and I bought the shoes." The witch's methods were surprisingly pedestrian. Though it spoke to how kind she was that she'd been willing to sew a whole dress for a stranger.

"We don't have much time. Let's go."

"How are we getting to the ball? Are we taking a pumpkin carriage? Are we?" Cinderella's eyes lit up in excitement, but the witch shook her head, a pitying expression on her face.

A pumpkin carriage? Is this girl okay? She grabbed Cinderella by the collar, then explained her plan.

"We'll be using gravity magic."

"Huh? What does—Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

The two of them sped into the night sky. They arrived not-so-safe and sound at the royal palace, but at least Cinderella was still in one piece. As she'd hoped, Cinderella was able to dance with the prince to her heart's content. She should have been happy, but all she could think about was the witch who'd seen her off with a sad smile.

"I'm sorry, Prince! I need to go!" Cinderella dashed off. The prince, still trying to figure out if this was the same girl who'd been stalking him earlier, chased after her. Shocked by Cinderella's rude behavior, her two stepsisters also chased after her. But Cinderella was faster than she looked, and she was able to give them the slip. All the prince and Cinderella's stepsisters found was one of her slippers lying on the palace steps.

"A single glass slipper... this definitely seems suspicious," the prince mused.

Cinderella's two stepsisters nodded in agreement. The three of them started down the steps, but stopped when they heard a voice.

"Miss Wiiiiiiiiiiiiitch! Please come out! You're the one that deserves to be at this ball, not me!"

They spotted Cinderella standing a bit further ahead and shouting up at the sky. The prince and Cinderella's two stepsisters watched, confused.

"If you don't, I'll get the whole country to search for you! Me or one of my sisters will definitely marry the prince and become the queen, so don't think we won't be able to do it! I have no qualms about abusing my authority!"

"Please don't..." The witch appeared a few meters above

Cinderella and floated down to the stairs. She lowered her hat to try and hide her expression, but Cinderella ran up to her and ripped it off. Just then, the clouds parted and a single ray of moonlight illuminated the witch. The prince was captivated by her stunning figure. The witch, too, seemed smitten with the prince.

Well, I'm sure you perceptive readers can tell what happened next. The prince asked for the witch's hand in marriage, and she naturally said yes. Though there was one condition. Cinderella and her two stepsisters had to also join their family. And so, the witch, the prince, Cinderella, and her two stepsisters lived happily ever after.

Some Things are Better Left Unknown

The calming scent of black tea filled Shizuku's room within the royal palace. A fancy tea set rested atop a sturdy wooden table, and steam rose from the two cups sitting across from each other. The two people enjoying a brief tea break were Shizuku and Kaori. They were finalizing their plans for the trip tomorrow and catching up on what the other had been up to.

"Anyway, it looks I'll be your healer for a little bit again, Shizuku-chan! Don't worry, even if you die, I can bring you back in just three minutes!"

"Please don't talk about resurrection like it's the same as heating instant noodles..." Shizuku smiled fondly. She was glad her best friend had become more confident. Then, as she was taking a sip of her tea, she heard a sudden knock on the door.

"Who is it?" Shizuku called out. The reply came not from the door, but from next to Kaori's ear.

"...It's me." Kaori shrieked and jumped backward. She hurriedly turned around and saw Yue's head poking out of one of her teleportation portals. Yue smiled in satisfaction, then mocked poor Kaori.

"What a cute scream... Kukukuku."

"Yue! Why do you keep pulling such childish pranks!? Sheesh!"

Yue widened her portal, revealing Tio and Shea standing behind her. The three of them stepped into Shizuku's room, while Shizuku looked blankly from her angry friend to these collected newcomers.

"Um, what's going on?"

"She's always like this, Shizuku-san. Yue-san's been playing pranks on Kaori-san ever since she learned how to teleport. She finds Kaori-san's reactions funny."

"It is only around Kaori that Yue lets her childish side show. In a way, you could say they're rather close. Though they're also always at each other's throats, too..."

“I can’t imagine Kaori getting in a fistfight with... Well, it looks like she’s doing it now, so I don’t have to imagine anything.”

Indeed, Kaori was currently attempting to pinch Yue’s cheeks and getting continually rebuffed. Shizuku watched the spectacle with a lonely gaze. She’d never seen her best friend so much as snap at someone. At first she’d been worried that Kaori wouldn’t fit in with her new group, especially since all the girls were her love rivals, but it appeared that had been a needless worry. While Shizuku was glad that Kaori could manage without her, it also made her a little sad. In order to distract herself from her feelings, Shizuku cleared her throat and changed the subject.

“So, what are you all here for?”

“Mmm. I wanted to ask Kaori to use restoration magic for us.”

Shizuku tilted her head quizzically. Apparently, Yue wanted to see what Hajime had been like in the time before he’d fallen into the abyss. As restoration magic was capable of restoring events of the past, and Kaori was the most skilled at using it, Yue was asking Kaori to help her recreate the Hajime of the past.

“Wow, so magic like that exists too,” Shizuku marveled.

Kaori puffed her chest out with pride, then started boasting.

“Ehehe, I knew all that training would pay off one day. Want to test it out here to see if it works? You’ll be able to see what me and Shizuku used to do when we stayed in the same room!” Kaori was getting a little ahead of herself, but she didn’t realize it. Without considering the consequences, she cast her restoration spell. Images of the room’s past overlaid themselves over everything like a hologram.

“Wow, you really can recreate the past.”

“Look, there’s Shizuku-san. She’s lying on her bed reading a book.” Like Shea said, an ethereal version of Shizuku was lying on the bed. She had her legs stretched out and was leaning against the headboard, reading.

“Th-This feels a little embarrassing...” Shizuku blushed as she watched the past version of herself lounge around. Little did she know, the truly embarrassing things were yet to come. The holographic door was flung open, and a maid rushed into the room. Past Shizuku was startled, then stiffened up when she saw who the person wearing the maid uniform was. As did everyone else in the present room.

“O-Of all the scenes it could pick, why did it have to be this one!? Hawawa, I need to hurry up and cancel the—”

“I won’t let you! I’ll use my own mana to keep it going!”

“Yue!?”

The person wearing the maid uniform was none other than Kaori. Though she tried to cancel the restoration spell, Yue continued to feed

it mana, keeping it active. Kaori grabbed Yue by the collar and begged her to stop.

“Shea!”

“Aye, aye, ma’am!” Shea pulled Kaori back and pinned her arms. The scene continued playing out, and past Kaori walked up to the room’s mirror, not even noticing that past Shizuku was there.

Present Shizuku smiled at the sight and mumbled.

“Ahhh, this is from back then.”

Bereft of allies, Kaori was forced to helplessly watch as her past self tried to stick her boobs out and pose sexily in front of the mirror.

“W-Would you like my services, Master?” Past Kaori winked.

Everyone silently watched her with wicked grins on their faces. Meanwhile, present Kaori looked like a withered husk.

“Don’t look at me...” she mumbled silently, too exhausted to even yell. She watched as past Shizuku bolted out of bed and ran out the door yelling, “Nagumo-kuuuuun! You won’t believe what Kaori’s doing!”

Yue and Shea both turned to present Shizuku.

“Good job, Shizuku.”

“Shizuku-san, you’re more evil than you look! I like it! I like it a lot!”

Their gleeful praise didn’t take any of the sting out of Kaori’s reproachful glare. Shizuku looked away uncomfortably, and the scene faded out of existence. After that, they dragged a half-conscious Kaori with them to the places Hajime had frequented in his short time at the castle. Now that they’d had their fill of Kaori’s dark past, it was time for what Yue had originally come for. Their first stop was the library. Hajime had supposedly spent a lot of time studying there. Still looking like a dead fish, Kaori wearily cast the spell.

“Look, it’s Hajime-san! Wow, his hair’s completely black!”

“Old Hajime looks so cute. Old Hajime looks so cute. Old Hajime looks so cute—”

“Y-Yue snapped! I will admit Master’s old appearance is indeed cute, but... Wait, Yue! Get away from him!”

Both Yue and Shea grew excited upon seeing Hajime’s old appearance. Yue was so enraptured that she tottered toward Hajime’s hologram like a butterfly floating toward honey. On the other hand, while Tio did find Hajime’s old appearance cute, she much preferred the caustic, blunt personality he had now. There was something else that caught her attention, however.

“Oh? Is that perchance Kaori I see in the distance?”

Everyone looked in the direction Tio was pointing, curious. Someone was staring at past Hajime from behind one of the bookshelves. Though most of her face was hidden by books, it was

unmistakably Kaori. She didn't do anything, and just silently monitored Hajime's movements. Everyone shrunk back, afraid.

"It's not what it looks like. I swear, there's a good explanation for this!" Kaori desperately tried to clear her name, but the fact that she followed Hajime every time he moved to a new bookshelf did a better job of explaining than her words ever could. To be honest, it was a little scary.

Afterward, they also tried using restoration magic in Hajime's old room. This time, they were treated to a scene of Hajime pouring over books at his desk late at night. Like before, Kaori was silently observing him, this time through the small gap underneath his door.

Other scenes showed Kaori interrogating the maids on Hajime's daily activities, or talking to Hajime about his favorite things even though Hajime had never told her. Everyone turned to present Kaori. Covered in cold sweat, she averted her gaze.

"So this is what a real stalker is like. Scary..."

"It was actually kind of horrifying, seeing Kaori-san constantly follow Hajime-san with that creepy grin on her face."

"Kaori, I know I have no right to say this... but you should have some self-respect."

"Kaori... I'm sorry. I can't back you up this time."

In tears, Kaori screamed.

"I'm sorry! Even I admit it looks kind of creepy!"

Making Good on Your Promises

On a dark night with barely any moonlight, two girls dashed across an empty plain. Their breaths came in ragged gasps, but they knew they couldn't stop or their pursuers would catch up to them.

"Ah!"

"Suzu! Are you alright!?"

They were running through the rocky field near the imperial capital, which meant that footing was bad. One of the fleeing girls, Suzu Taniguchi, tripped over a fallen pebble. Using her supernatural agility, the other girl, Shizuku, grabbed Suzu before she fell.

"Shizushizu, I'm done for. You have to escape alone!"

"Don't be ridiculous! We're getting out of this together!"

Seeing Shizuku's determination, Suzu mentally berated herself for being so weak, then willed herself to her feet. Unfortunately, her resolve meant little.

"And where do you think you're going?"

Shizuku and Suzu both shrieked. They whirled around, and a grizzled old rabbitman appeared from the darkness... It was the Haulia's chief, Cam.

“C-Cam-san! Please stop this!” Shizuku hugged Suzu, who was trembling in fear, and begged for mercy. However, Cam simply grinned and shook his head.

“Do you think we would ever defy our boss’ orders?”

“I don’t... dammit!”

“Sh-Shizushizu, it’s not like you to curse! Get a grip!”

Shizuku’s ponytail swung back and forth as she shook her head, tears spilling from her eyes.

Oh no, she’s too far gone. It’s all up to me now!

“Shizushizu... I’ll protect you! Don’t look down on the hero party’s strongest Barrier Mast—” Before Suzu could even finish her sentence, there was a slight whoosh, and a blow dart embedded itself into her forehead.

“Suzu!”

Suzu’s eyes rolled back in her head, and she fell limply to the ground.

“H-How dare you do that to Suzu! I’ll never for—” Shizuku, too, was silenced before she could finish. A pungent smell wafted into her nostrils, and she looked up to see Cam waving a fan and his bunny ears at her.

“C-Cam-san. What ish...” Shizuku’s eyes rolled back in her head, and she too fell limply to the ground.

“Mission complete. I’ll bring the targets back to you, Boss.”

Hajime’s loyal rabbits scurried about in the dark. As for why they, the warriors who had toppled the imperial capital in one night, were chasing down Shizuku and Suzu, well—

“Hajime-san, I know you’re mad at them for laughing at you when dad and the others told everyone their painfully embarrassing nicknames, but did you really have to go so far?”

“Y-Yeah, Hajime-kun. We still need to warp all the Haulia back to the sea of trees, so let’s just leave it at this, okay?”

Hajime turned to Shea and Kaori, then responded in a flat voice.

“I always make good on my promises.” He had promised to punish Shizuku and Suzu back when they’d first met Par and the others, and Hajime was the kind of man who was as good as his word. He definitely wasn’t doing this just because he’d been so embarrassed he’d never forget that incident for the rest of his life or anything.

Kouki and Ryutarou tried to object as well, but when they saw the look in Hajime’s eyes, they thought better of it and looked away.

Shizuku and Suzu were left defenseless. And so, Hajime meted out their punishment.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah this is soooooo embarrassing! My skirt’s way too short, you can see everything!”

“Just kill me now.”

Hajime had forced the two of them to change into Haulia clothes. The same ones Shea usually wore. Since they'd laughed harder than everyone else, he'd made their punishment the most extreme. Suzu desperately tried to pull the hem of her skirt down with one hand while covering her modest breasts with the other. Teary-eyed and red-faced, she looked cute even to the Haulia, who were used to seeing their women wear such outfits. On the other hand, Shizuku didn't even bother to hide her charming, beautiful figure, which could give even Shea a run for her money.

"Just kill me now." Her eyes were empty and devoid of emotion. She looked so pitiful that no one could bring themselves to look at her. A number of flashes filled the room.

"Shizuku and Suzu's punishment, taken at the outskirts of the imperial capital... There, all labeled now."

Hajime grinned wickedly as he took photos with his specially crafted artifact and labeled each one. Kouki and Ryutarou yelled at him, calling him a demon. The Haulia sang his praises, saying things like "You're amazing, Boss. You don't even show mercy to women!" And Yue and the others just watched with troubled expressions on their faces. However, Hajime didn't notice any of it, as he was far too busy having fun.

Arifureta Magic Academy ~Christmas Showdown~

The academy grew busier as Christmas drew near. Today, all of the students were gathered in the auditorium for an emergency assembly. To their surprise, it was Aiko, not chairwoman Tio, who came out to greet them. Upon seeing her grimace, the students' expressions stiffened.

"Everyone, I have bad news. Santa Claus has been sent to the hospital by one of our students."

The students groaned in unison. Incidentally, Santa was real in this world. He was a wealthy multi-billionaire who went around giving presents to all the good kids on Christmas Day.

"Fortunately, his life isn't in any danger. There is, however, another problem. His reindeer have gone on strike and are nowhere to be found!"

To be fair, their boss had just been hospitalized. It was understandable that they'd want the time off. The school's beleaguered student council president raised her hand and spoke up.

"Ai-chan-sensei! Please tell us who exactly is responsible for injuring Santa!"

Who's the bastard who piled even more work on me during the holidays!? I'll fucking kill him! Both the teachers and the students

shivered at the intensity in Shizuku's gaze.

Overwhelmed, Aiko gave in and confessed in as roundabout a manner as she could.

"A-According to the public safety committee member who was at the scene, the culprits' confession were as follows: 'All I wanted was to do was cosplay as Santa, ride on his reindeer, and tell Hajime that I'd be his present this Christmas. If those pesky flies hadn't gotten in the way, Santa wouldn't have gotten hurt,' and 'I could not forgive her for trying to get ahead of the rest of us. I never expected that she would dodge my breath or that Santa would be the one sitting behind her...'"

So it was Yue-sensei and Chairwoman Tio! All the students thought simultaneously.

"A-At any rate, there's only two days left until Christmas! We need to find and capture all the reindeer by then! These are the wanted posters Santa-san gave us!" The projector whirled to life, and the wanted posters appeared on the auditorium's large screen.

WANTED—Dasher of the Fierce Antlers. His tackle has the force of a battering ram, so be careful.

WANTED—Prancer of the Trampling Hooves. His kicks can shatter steel, so be careful.

WANTED—Dancer of the Elusive Tails. His breakdance kicks have killed hundreds, so be careful.

WANTED—Vixen of the Gilded Tongue. His honeyed words have lead many to ruin, so be careful.

WANTED—Thunder Brothers Donner and Blitzen. The Lightning Fields they create can scorch anything, so be careful.

WANTED—Cupid, the Matchmaker's Eyes. One look into his eyes and you will be his forever, so be careful.

WANTED—Comet, the Hurling Flash. His dash leaves sonic booms in his wake, so be careful.

WANTED—Rudolf of the Divine Nose. He has a complex about his nose, so be careful.

Are they supposed to be monsters or something!? the students silently bemoaned.

"They can be a little rambunctious, but I'm sure you kids can handle it! Please work hard to restore our school's honor!" The students could tell Aiko was desperate, so with a weary sigh, they agreed to help. Two days later, on Christmas. While everyone else was enjoying time with their family or lovers, Kouki and Ryutarou lay wrapped up in bandages in the academy's infirmary

"Ryutarou, you alright? You've been moaning an awful lot."

"Barely. You look even worse than I do Kouki. Your face's a mess."

It looked like a truck had run over Kouki's face, while Ryutarou

had no unbroken ribs left. Suzu, Eri, and Shizuku all looked like hell as well. Surprisingly, Kaori and Shea were lying down as well. Kaori had buried her face into her pillow, while Shea was wrangling with her bandages and screaming.

“I’ll get you next time,” she bellowed.

Practically no student had escaped this affair unscathed. Santa’s reindeer had been so powerful that it was hard to believe they were mere animals. Eventually, Hajime had gotten tired of being led around the nose by them and turned the entire battlefield into a wasteland with his Hyperion. He’d given them one final warning, claiming he’d kill them if they didn’t surrender. Had he not done so, the entire student body may have been wiped out.

The reindeer may have possessed monstrous strength, but they still had their old animal instincts. And those very instincts had told them Hajime was serious, so they’d quietly surrendered. After that, he’d forced Yue and Tio to apologize, ostensibly bringing the case to a close.

And so, on Christmas, most of the students lay groaning in bed. Just then, the window popped open and a figure hopped inside.

“Merry Christmas.”

“N-No way...” Kouki groaned, while Ryutarou punched himself to make sure he was actually awake. The other students all looked on in shock. *Hajime* had just come inside wearing a Santa costume. He might have been frowning, but he was really wearing the outfit!

“Mmmm, Merry Christmas. Sorry for all the trouble.”

“My apologies, dear students, and Merry Christmas.”

Now the students were even more shocked. Yue and Tio had entered behind Hajime, wearing reindeer suits. In fact, this was the first time any of them had seen Yue look even mildly embarrassed. Quite a few of them found her outfit so cute they succumbed to nosebleeds.

“This is one of the things Santa asked us to do if we wanted him to forgive us. I’d have to play Santa, while Yue-sensei and Tio would be the reindeer.”

Eyepatch Santa pulled a bundle of presents out of his Treasure Trove, and for once the students felt like all their suffering had really been worthwhile.

Even Though I’m the Princess

The morning after the Haulia defeated the empire, Liliana sat in her room and sighed to herself.

“What seems to be the matter, Princess?” Helina asked. As Liliana hadn’t even been conscious of her sigh, she was a little taken aback by

her maid's question.

"You seemed to be worrying about something, what with the sighing and all," Helina added.

"Huh? I sighed? Um, I was just thinking about the events of last night, really..."

Upon hearing her vague response, Helina nodded in understanding.

"I see. So your head was full of thoughts of Nagumo-sama, then."

"Whash are you talking about?" Though Liliana managed to keep her expression neutral, she couldn't keep herself from slurring her words, nor could she stop the blush that crept up her face.

"I know it's a bit presumptuous of me to give advice, but I think you should go for it, Princess!"

"I have no idea what you're referring to!"

"As far as I am aware, he's your first love. I can understand why you're so nervous. However, I'll say it again. Just go for it! Your rivals are too strong for subtleties to work. Unless you act aggressively, you won't stand a ghost of a chance against them! Show him the mettle of a princess, Liliana-sama! Hurry up and go get him already!"

"Calm down, Helina!"

Both girls were panting heavily now.

"My apologies. It's just, you've always put your duties as a princess first for as long as I can remember, Liliana-sama, so I was just so glad to see you finally acting like a normal girl for once..."

"Ugh, I didn't want anyone to find out, Helina..." Liliana hadn't been planning on telling anyone that she'd fallen for the walking bundle of unreasonableness that was Hajime.

"Pshaw, everyone who saw you at that ball already knows, Princess. You wore your feelings on your sleeve."

"W-Was it really that obvious?"

Helina nodded, a huge smile on her face, which only made Liliana blush even harder.

"Regardless of how things go, unless you try to woo him a little more he'll likely forget you even exist. Tell me, are you truly alright with that?"

I... really don't want that to happen. Liliana shook her head.

"B-But, how am I supposed to woo someone in the first place? Err, not that I plan on wooing Nagumo-san, since I'm a princess and all, but just for reference."

"Understood, Princess. Allow me teach you everything I know."

Liliana watched her maid bow to her with a mixture of trepidation and hope in her heart.

Thirty minutes later, Liliana found Hajime working on transmuting something.

“Umm, Nagumo-san? What are you working on?”

“Hm? Princess? What do you—” Hajime paused what he was doing and turned around. What he saw left him speechless. Beside him, Yue and the others were also at a loss for words.

“L-Lily!? Why are you wearing our school uniform!?”

Liliana was indeed wearing a perfect replica of Kaori and the others’ school uniform. A blazer and short skirt, black socks, and loafers. She even had a replica of the school badge.

“I-I just found it by coincidence in my luggage, so I thought I’d try it on.”

What kind of coincidence leads to that!? Hajime thought to himself. In truth, Helina had long suspected Liliana might need a uniform like this and had sewn a replica just in case. Liliana pulled a fake student notebook out of her pocket and started reading through it. After confirming the contents, she steeled her resolve and did a quick twirl in front of Hajime.

“H-How was that?”

Yue and the others instantly realized what was going on. *This girl wants to join the fight!* The fight over who got Hajime, of course.

“I really don’t know what to say...” Realizing the slight change in the atmosphere around Yue and the others, Hajime decided to play it safe. Disappointed, Liliana once again looked through her student notebook.

“Ugh, do I really have to do this?” Liliana looked nervous and peered over her shoulder as she said that. From behind the door, Helina gave her a thumbs-up. Blushing, Liliana slapped her cheeks, resolutely untied her ribbon, and unbuttoned the first few buttons of her blouse.

“Oh no, I tripped,” she said in a clearly rehearsed voice, and stumbled toward Hajime. With a sigh, he dodged out of the way and grabbed her by the back of her collar. Then, he lifted her up like one would a cat, and shook his head. As always, Hajime had no respect for a maiden’s heart.

“P-Please wait, Nagumo-san! Helinaaaaaa, what am I supposed—” Unfortunately, Helina was nowhere to be found.

“Look, Princess. I’m busy right now, okay?” A portal opened up beside him as he said that, and Liliana looked at Hajime in disbelief. Surely he wouldn’t?

“Go play with your maid for a bit,” he said, then unceremoniously chucked the princess through the portal. She landed right on top of Helina after she fell through it.

“*Sniffle...* Even though I’m a princess... he still treats me like this... Oh, and Helina, don’t think you’ll be getting away with this!”

Liliana’s remorseful and resentful wails echoed through the

imperial castle's halls for quite a while.

Be Careful How You Use Spirit Magic

Hajime walked down the halls of the royal palace, glancing about as he went.

"I can't find Yue and the others anywhere... Man, where'd they go?" Unable to find the people he was looking for, Hajime stopped and scratched his cheek. After thinking about it for a few minutes, he suddenly remembered something and pulled a metal plate out of his pocket.

"I forgot I made a new communicator with spirit magic... It's still just a prototype, but let's test it out." One of spirit magic's spells, Soul Resonance, worked in a similar way to Telepathy. Unlike Telepathy though, it was extremely difficult to intercept or eavesdrop on. That was why Hajime had made a new artifact that utilized it instead. Hajime poured mana into the plate to activate the artifact.

"Hm? What's this? The mana inside it keeps expanding... Wait, crap. At this rate it'll go berserk—" A blinding flash of light engulfed the hallway.

"You leave for Haltina tomorrow, right? Be careful, Shizuku."

"Thanks for worrying about me, Yuka. Take care of everyone here, alright? You're basically our leader while we're gone."

"I'm not really the leading type. Well, as long as Nagayama and the others are here, we should be fine, but... Hm? Nagumo?" Yuka broke off and looked up at the person approaching them. The two girls thought to call out to him, but hesitated when they saw how strange he was acting.

"Oh no, what do I do? This probably happened because someone used spirit magic, but... to think things would end up like this."

The person in front of the two girls was unmistakably Hajime Nagumo. It was obviously the same boy who wrapped arrogance and irrationality around him like a second skin. And right now, he was fidgeting like a nervous child. Shizuku and Yuka exchanged confused glances. Somehow, Hajime seemed rather feminine. Before they could say anything, Hajime suddenly blushed and started poking himself.

"So this is what a boy's body is like... what Hajime-kun's body is like... It's so hard *Gulp*..." Hajime gulped and looked down at his own crotch.

What on earth is that strange, disgusting creature? Shizuku and Yuka thought simultaneously. Unable to watch any longer, Shizuku squeezed out her courage and called out to Hajime.

"U-Um, Nagumo-kun?"

"Sh-Shizuku-chan!? And Yuka-chan!"

Seeing Hajime light up like that and speak to them in such a friendly and excited manner sent shivers down their spines.

“Thank goodness! The truth is, I have a bit of a problem right now and I could... Umm, Shizuku-chan? Yuka-chan? Why are you guys backing away?” Hajime walked toward Shizuku and Yuka, tears in his eyes.

“C-Calm down, Nagumo. You’ve just exhausted yourself from working too hard, so just stop right there for now!”

“Nagumo-kun, let’s go see Kaori, okay? She’ll be able to fix you right up, I’m sure!”

Shizuku and Yuka took one step back for every single step Hajime took toward them.

“Huh!? Oh yeah, I’m Hajime-kun right now! It’s okay, you two! I’m Kaori!”

Shizuku and Yuka exchanged glances. Then, after a moment’s delay, they turned on their heels and ran.

“Waaaaaaait! Why are you running away from me, Shizuku-chaaan, Yuka-chaaaaaan!?”

“Eeek, he’s coming after us! Someone help! Nagumo’s gone crazy!”

“Kaoriii! Where are you!? We need you to fix Nagumo-kun!”

“Like I said, *I am* Kaori! Stop running away from me!”

“Sorry, but you’re creeping us out too much, so we can’t!”

Hajime crying was such a horrifying sight that Shizuku and Yuka couldn’t even bring themselves to turn back.

Kouki and Ryutarou had headed out into the city to stock up on supplies for the journey ahead. As they passed by a side street, Ryutarou looked and saw something that puzzled him.

“Hm? Isn’t that Yue-san and Shea-san over there?”

“Huh? Oh, you’re right. What are they doing in a place like—” Kouki trailed off. The scene unfolding before him was so surreal that his thoughts ground to a halt.

“You fucking perverted dragon. What were you doing with Yue’s body!?”

“I-I just acted on instinct! Please forgive me! Her body was just so pretty that I couldn’t help myself!”

Shea stared coldly down at Yue as she kicked her in the stomach. Kouki and Ryutarou’s jaws dropped open. Both Yue’s strange fetishes and Shea’s sadistic streak were something they’d never seen before. Moreover, they’d never seen Shea torment at all...

“Ugh, thanks to Yue’s automatically healing body, being kicked brings me no pleasure... She heals right away. I swear, it’s like torture! Her body does not suit me in the slightest!”

“Thank god, you masochistic freak.”

“However, I must say! Seeing the normally gentle Shea glare at me with such cold eyes is a rare and exquisite experience! I cannot get enough of it! Haaah... Haaah...!”

“Tch, so you can find pleasure in any situation, huh? I better hurry up and do something before this pervert ruins Yue’s body.”

Yue was on the ground, panting, while Shea clicked her tongue like a certain other boy often did. The sight was so shocking that Kouki and Ryutarou simply averted their gaze and hurriedly walked away.

“Let’s pretend we never saw that.”

That was the day the two of them learned a valuable lesson. Never make a rabbit angry. No matter what. Incidentally, Shea was currently enjoying herself in Tio’s body. She flew high up in the sky screaming, “Yahoooooooooooo! This is awesome!” It seemed Shea wasn’t the least bit bothered by the fact that she’d swapped bodies with someone.

Suzu, Taeko, and Nana were on their way back from the training grounds when they spotted Kaori in one of the hallways.

“Ah, Kaoriiin!” Suzu waved her hand and called out to her in a loud voice. Kaori turned to the three of them and nodded quietly.

“...Hi.”

Kaori seemed somewhat different from usual, but the three girls paid it no mind. The four of them started walking back to their rooms together, and Nana eventually started talking.

“By the way, Kaoricchi, your new body’s amazing! It used to belong to someone named Noint, right? You were cute before, but now you have like this, divine beauty inside you too.”

“I can’t believe you were willing to change bodies just for Nagumo-kun.”

Kaori’s lips split into a grin before she replied.

“It’s for the man she loves. This much is to be expected.”

Wow, that’s some deep devotion. Seeing all three of them at a loss for words, Kaori chuckled. There was something oddly mature about her expression. And she seemed to be oozing an unusual amount of sensuality to boot.

“Y-You feel different somehow, Kaorin...” Suzu gulped. The atmosphere grew a little weird, so Nana tried to crack a joke to bring things back to normal.

“Is it because you did, you know, *those* things with Nagumocchi?”

“What do you mean by ‘those things?’”

That wasn’t the reply Nana was expecting. She stiffened, then blushed. Though she, Taeko, and Yuka had been known as some of the more wild girls in their class, the three of them were surprisingly pure. Suzu and Taeko blushed too. After a bit, Kaori smiled seductively and spoke.

“Hajime was delicious.” With those parting remarks, she walked off. Suzu and the others remained rooted to the spot, too stunned to even respond.

Shortly afterward, the body swapping incident brought about by Hajime’s spirit magic artifact going out of control resolved itself when the artifact ran out of mana.

“Eeek, you’re acting like a disgusting creep! Return to your senses, Nagumo! What are you trying to do to us!?” Cornered, Yuka collapsed into a crying heap while Shizuku said “I hate this Nagumo-kun” over and over with soulless eyes.

“Huh? Who the fuck are you calling a disgusting creep? You wanna go?” Suddenly, Hajime returned to normal, and he went back to yelling angrily at people.

“He’s back! Nagumo’s back!”

“The world’s been saved!”

Yuka and Shizuku clung to Hajime and wept tears of relief.

Meanwhile, in another location...

“Shea, you’ve got guts squeezing my head like this.”

“Hweh!? Why am I grabbing you like this, Yue-san!?”

Yue’s angry voice echoed through the tiny alley they were in. Shea’s ears folded over timidly as she awaited her punishment. A second later, lightning rained from the sky, terrifying the nearby residents.

Meanwhile, in yet another location...

“Ah, Suzu-chan, Nana-chan, Taeko-chan! Hey, listen to this. Something terrible just happened to me. I was... Wait, what’s wrong?”

Kaori’s three friends were acting odd. At her voice, though, they snapped back to reality.

“Kaorin, you climbed the stairs to adulthood before us! You left us all behind!”

“Kaoricchi... No, I suppose I should call you Kaori-san now.”

“Forget that, we should be calling her onee-sama! You don’t mind, do you Kaori-oneesama!?”

Who on earth was in my body!? And what did they do!?

For some time after, all three of them called Kaori onee-sama and treated her with reverence. It garnered more than a few odd looks.

Meanwhile, high up in the sky...

Tio regained consciousness, only to realize she was free-falling. Then, she slammed into one of the capital’s buildings and lay twitching atop its roof.

“Owww! What in heaven’s name just happened!? I can feel an indescribable pleasure spreading through every inch of my body! Haaah... Haaah... I have no idea who was using my body before, but you have my heartfelt gratitude for leaving me with such a wonderful

reward! Thank you!”

Naturally, when Heiligh’s residents found her, they called the city watch on her.

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by Ryo Shirakome

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